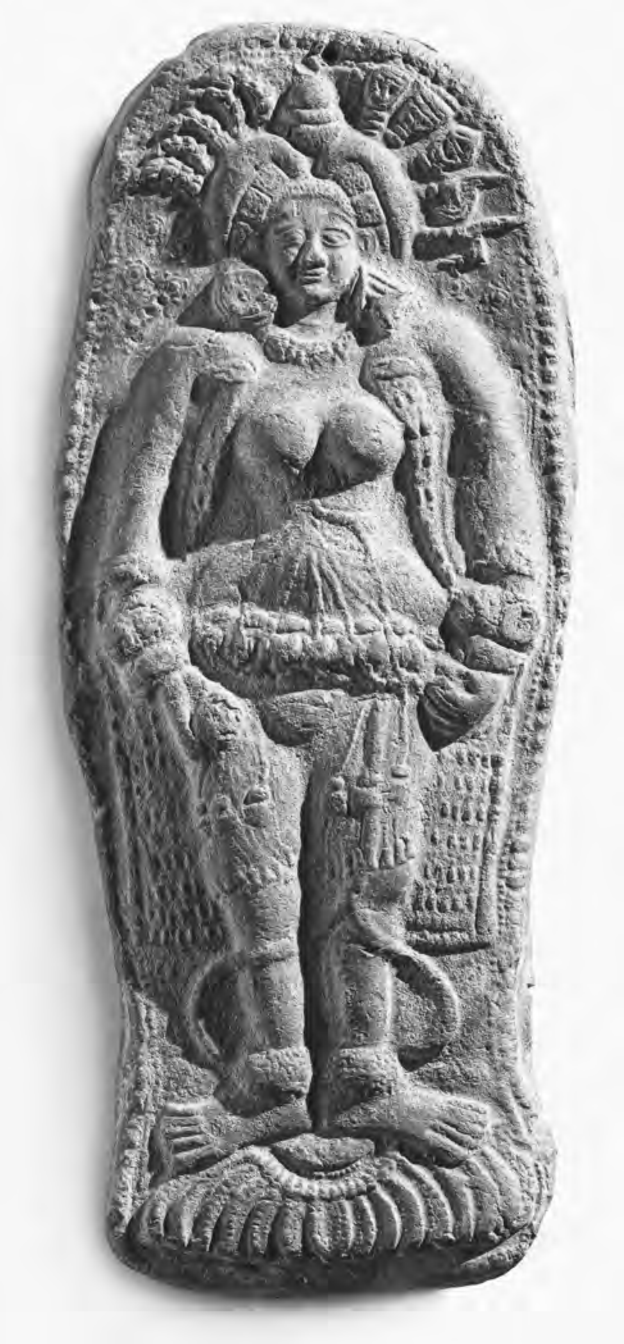
RELIGIONS OF EARLY INDIA



Goddess of Abundance, terracotta, Kaushambi, Uttar Pradesh, ca. 2nd century BCE. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Gift of Paul F. Walter (M.90.196.1). Photo copyright © Museum Associates/LACMA.

Religions of Early India

A CULTURAL HISTORY

RICHARD H. DAVIS

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ABBREVIATIONS

AA	*Ashokavadana*
ADhS	*Apastamba Dharmasutra*
ASh	*Arthashastra* of Kautilya
BAU	*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*
BCh	*Buddhacharita* of Ashvaghosha
BDhS	*Baudhayana Dharmasutra*
BGPS	*Baudhayana Grihya Parishishta Sutra*
BhG	*Bhagavad Gita*
CV	*Cullavagga* of the *Vinaya Pitaka*
ChU	*Chandogya Upanishad*
DhP	*Dhammapada*
DM	*Devimahatmya*
DN	*Digha Nikaya*
DV	*Dipavamsa*
GDhS	*Gautama Dharmasutra*
HV	*Harivamsha*
KP	*Kurma Purana*
KS	*Kamasutra* of Vatsyayana Mallanaga
LS	*Lotus Sutra*
MBh	*Mahabharata*
MD	*Meghaduta* of Kalidasa
MDhSh	*Manava Dharmashastra*
MN	*Majjhima Nikaya*
MP	*Matsya Purana*
MPNS	*Mahaparinirvana Sutra*
MU	*Mundaka Upanishad*
MV	*Mahavagga* of the *Vinaya Pitaka*
MVa	*Mahavamsa*

NSh	*Natyashastra* of Bharata
Ram	*Ramayana* of Valmiki
RV	*Rig Veda*
RVa	*Raghuvamsha* of Kalidasa
ShBr	*Shatapatha Brahmana*
ShvU	*Shvetashvatara Upanishad*
SI	Sircar, *Select Inscriptions*
SN	*Sutta Nipata*
SRK	*Subhashitaratnakosha* of Vidyakara
VDhS	*Vasishtha Dharmasutra*
VP	*Vishnu Purana*
YDhSh	*Yajnavalkya Dharmashastra*
YS	*Yogasutras* of Patanjali

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THIS BOOK HAS an origin story. In the summer of 1975, before I began graduate study at the University of Toronto, I met with faculty at the university's Sanskrit and Indian studies department. The historian Narendra Wagle encouraged my studies and urged me to read two books in preparation for classes: Romila Thapar's *History of India* (1966) and A. L. Basham's *The Wonder That Was India* (1954). I dutifully picked up both at the UT bookstore, and on long bus rides from Toronto to Columbus, Ohio, and back again to Toronto, I carefully read both. I felt particularly inspired by Basham's comprehensive approach to cultural history and the warmth of his writing about India. When I began graduate classwork, these two works seemed to provide a foundation upon which I could ground more specialized studies.

In 1978 I took up Ph.D. studies in the South Asian languages and civilizations department at the University of Chicago. My first quarter there I was fortunate to sign up for a class with the intriguing title, "Cultural Constructions of Ancient India," taught by historian Ronald Inden and Sanskritist Donald Nelson. From that course I retained two things above all. One was to look with a critical eye on most secondary scholarly writing on India. This definitely included Basham's book. Second, and more far-reaching, was methodological: to situate and read primary Indic works as engaged in dialogue with one another. This may seem simple and obvious, but it has been formative for me in both teaching and writing.

In 2004 I organized a panel titled "Fifty Years of *Wonder*" at the annual conference of the Association for Asian Studies to honor and reflect critically on Basham's work. We were fortunate to have papers by two of Basham's most distinguished students, Romila Thapar and Thomas Trautmann. At that time I wondered why nothing quite like *The Wonder That Was India* had appeared in the half-century since its publication, something that would incorporate the historical research since Basham's time. There had been several worthy general histories of India (including those of Thapar and Trautmann), numerous overviews of particular Indian religions, excellent surveys of Indian art history—but nothing that sought to provide a broad and general account of the cultural history of early India. I decided there was a need for a replacement. With ambition and some hubris, I decided I should write that replacement. In the initial years working on this book, I called my project "New Wonder."

Like all origin stories, this one highlights some things and no doubt erases others. It is less a reliable account of the factual past (though all these things did take place) than it is a program for present and future projects. For me it has served as a guidepost for writing this book. My aspiration has been to compose something that a future Wagle could recommend to a future Davis: a sufficiently detailed and interesting point of departure, a gateway to further study of the religious and cultural history of early India. It should incorporate the new research done in the decades since Basham's work and reflect some of the recent directions that scholarship has taken. And it would adopt an orientation somewhat different from that of Basham in 1954.

In *Wonder*, Basham spoke of his intention to "interpret ancient Indian civilization" for the "ordinary Western reader." In the aftermath of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and much subsequent postcolonial writing, such intentions now appear suspicious. I have not seen my project as an effort to "interpret," but rather to listen to voices from early India and to situate them in changing historical circumstances. Rather than a singular Indian "civilization," I have preferred the plural "religious cultures." For an imagined audience, I appreciate Basham's idea for an "ordinary" reader—wherever that reader may be found, in the United States, the UK, Europe, India, or anywhere in our integrated one world. As for me, I have encountered those intelligent, engaged, curious, nonspecialist, "ordinary" readers most immediately in college classrooms, as both student and teacher.

Of my own host of teachers, I can trace one line of descent back to Professor Basham, through his student Professor Wagle. I wish to single out my adviser at the University of Chicago, Ronald Inden, who has made the greatest enduring impact on my own historiographical thinking. Anyone who knows Inden's work will see its imprint, like the pentimento beneath a painting, through many parts of this book. In addition to my teachers, I express gratitude toward my students. I taught undergraduate classes at Yale University and Bard College for thirty-five years. These students accepted my insistence that they encounter primary sources from long ago and far away, and seek to hear their voices, with a minimum of secondary interpretation. Their questions and insights have provided an ongoing orientation for me in writing this religious history.

This book project has gestated for a long time, and my acknowledgments are many. I begin with my esteemed colleagues at Bard College for countless Hopson hallway and Kline lunchroom conversations over many years, most notably Sanjib Baruah, Jon Brockopp, Bruce Chilton, Brad Clough, Rob Culp, Carolyn Dewald, Mark Lytle, Kristin Scheible, Shai Secunda, and Dominique Townsend. I also owe a special debt to senior scholars who have supported this work as references or manuscript readers: Daud Ali, Caroline Walker Bynum, Jack Hawley, and Donald Lopez, Jr. Among the multitude of colleagues and friends who have consulted and offered valuable comments and guidance along the way are Abhishek Amar, Naman Ahuja, Mark Baron, Elise Boisanté, Carol Bolon, Pia Brancaccio, John Cort, Rae Erin Dachille, Dennis Dalton, Rob DeCaroli, Paul Dundas, Emmanuel Francis, Marko Geslani, Valérie Gillet, Dominic Goodall, Charlotte Gorant, Pika Ghosh, Phyllis Granoff, Sumit Guha, Charles Hallisey, Brian Hatcher, Rajeev Kadambi, Padma Kaimal, Subhashini Kaligotla, James Laine, Hillary Langberg, Todd Lewis, Philip Lutgendorf, Leslie Orr, Cynthia Packert, Karen Pechilis, Indira Peterson, Paula Richman, Charlotte Schmid, Tamara Sears, Martha Selby, Akira Shimada, Doris Srinivasan, Bruce Sullivan, Cyndy Talbot, Tapati Thakurta-Guha, Aleksandar Uskokov, and Jarrod Whitaker.

During the writing of this book, I made several trips to South Asia to meet with experts and to visit and photograph relevant sites. For help in Kurukshetra, Haryana, I thank archeologist Rajendra Rana. In Tamilnadu I had the good fortune to participate in two workshops on the “Archaeology of Bhakti,” conducted by the École francaise d’Extrême-Orient in Pondichery, and to discuss religious sites in situ with an expert group of scholars. For an expert tour of Buddhist sites in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Nepal, I am indebted to Shantum Seth, Jagdish Chamola, and the Buddhapath organization. During two trips in Madhya Pradesh, I profited from the help of Mohan C. Joshi (at Sanchi), Hookam Chand Malik (in Vidisha), and Manju and Pramod Sharma (in Bhopal). In the Mumbai area, I enjoyed the guidance of André Baptista and Kumud Kanitkar. During travels in the Badami area of Karnataka, I am grateful for the hospitality of Arvind Sethi and his friends from Coonoor, and for the expertise of Srinivas Padigar and Chandru Katageri. In Kolkata I profited from discussions about Chandraketugarh with Rajat Sanyal and Rik Chattopadhyay. In Sri Lanka, on a second Buddhapath pilgrimage-tour with Shantum Seth, the master guide Karu Pairis greatly informed my visits to Buddhist sites.

I am grateful to various museums and archives for facilitating the illustrations that appear in this book. I thank the curators of South Asian collections who have helped me: Kurt Behrendt, John Guy, Sonya Rhie Mace, Stephen Markel, and Darielle Mason. Mark Kenoyer and the Harappa.com group were generous with their wonderful Indus Valley slide collection. I give special thanks to Susan Huntington and the Huntington Photographic Archive for proactive help in finding illustrations in that outstanding photographic resource. I am greatly indebted to Nat Case, at INCase, LLC, for the excellent maps that appear throughout this book.

While working on this book I had the opportunity to present portions of this material at several colleges: College of the Holy Cross, Drake University, Haverford College, and Middlebury College. At the University of Delhi, I greatly valued the chance to meet with faculty and to conduct a lively workshop with graduate students in the Department of History. I am especially grateful to Rashmi Poddar and the Jnanapravaha Mumbai educational institute for allowing me the opportunity to present a series of six lectures, titled "Varieties of Religious Experience in Early India," which outlined several key chapters of my work. I thank the audience members at Jnanapravaha for their thoughtful questions and suggestions.

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I dedicate this book to my wife, Rita W. McCleary. Our partnership goes back to 1975 (and a bit further), when we decided to both enroll in graduate programs in Toronto. In her professional life she is an excellent psychotherapist. For this book and my other writings, she has been a perspicacious editor. But mainly, her unflagging support and care over decades has been the real foundation of my adult life.

RELIGIONS OF EARLY INDIA

Introduction

ONCE IN A PREVIOUS EON, it is said, the gods and demons joined together to churn the primordial ocean of milk. This origin story is told in the Sanskrit epic *Ramayana* and in many other early Indian works.[1] According to the *Ramayana*, the gods and demons both wish to become immortal, free from all sickness and old age. They believe that the cosmic ocean holds an essence called *amrita* (non-dead) and that by churning the ocean, as one might churn milk to extract butter, they could obtain that elixir of immortality. In some versions of the story, it is the goddess of prosperity, Shri Lakshmi, that they seek. To attain such lofty goals, these two groups, normally implacable enemies, must cooperate. They employ suitably cosmic implements for the task: the world-mountain Mandara will be the churning pole, and world-spanning snake Vasuki serves as the rope. In many versions, the god Vishnu assumes the form of an enormous tortoise, dives to the bottom of the ocean, and offers his shell as pivot for the pole.

As the gods and demons exert themselves, pulling Vasuki back and forth to spin the immense mountain, extraordinary things begin to rise up from the roiling ocean waters. The divine physician Dhanvantari emerges, along with great troops of beautiful celestial dancers, the Apsarases. Many auspicious items come into existence from the churning. The goddess of wine Varuni, the eminent horse Ucchaishravas, the most precious gem Kaustubha, the cow of plenty Surabhi, the wish-granting tree Parijata, the supreme elephant Airavata, and the Moon all arise from the ocean. (The list of items varies slightly from version to version.) The goddess Shri Lakshmi rises forth, seated on a lotus. In most versions she gravitates to the god she perceives as most eminent, Vishnu.

But not all is auspicious. The potent poison Kalakuta also emerges from the churning, posing the dilemma of how to keep this deadly substance from annihilating the world. In some versions, the great god Shiva swallows the poison. This neutralizes its destructive potency, but it also turns Shiva's neck forever blue.

Finally the elixir of immortality emerges. Both gods and demons want to monopolize this treasure. Their cooperation breaks down and they begin to fight. In the conflict the demons make the first grab and get ahold of the amrita. In many versions, Vishnu assumes the form of a seductive female, Mohini, and beguiles the demons into handing over the elixir, which Mohini then gives to the gods. The story ends with the gods drinking the amrita, defeating the demons, and reestablishing their supremacy in the heavens.

Churning the Ocean of Religions

This book is a narrative history of religious cultures in early India, covering a broad span of two thousand years. It begins with the earliest available religious texts of ancient India, the hymns of the *Rig Veda*, which date back to around 1300–1000 BCE, and it ends at the beginning of the eighth century CE, during the imperial dynasties of the Chalukyas in the Deccan and the Pallavas in southern India. In these early centuries, India was a place of remarkable religious activity: elaborate sacrificial rituals, rigorous regimes of personal austerity, psychospiritual experimentation, vigorous theological debate, sophisticated poetic composition, ideals of righteous kingship, flourishing arts of sculpture and architecture, fervent devotional practices, utopian visions, and energetic missionizing. It was the birthplace of the three world religions we now know as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. It was also the home of other religions, often unnamed, that are usually classified as "folk" or "popular" religions. These, too, played an important role in the development of religion in early India.

But what do we mean by "religion"? How should we define "religious cultures" in early India? Scholars in Religious Studies and in adjacent disciplines have long traced the semantic history of the term "religion" and have proposed definitions for this supposedly universal feature of human life. In his 1988 article "Religion, Religions, Religious," Jonathan Z. Smith points to a 1912 study that listed fifty definitions of religion—and no doubt at least another fifty have been proposed in the century since that study.[2] In his 1902 treatise, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James responded to this same plethora of definitions:

> Meanwhile the very fact that they [definitions of "religion"] are so many and so different from one another is enough to prove that the word "religion" cannot stand for any single principle or essence, but is rather a collective name. . . . Let us not fall immediately into a one-sided view of our subject, but let us rather admit freely at the outset that we may very likely find no one

> essence, but many characters which may alternately be equally important in religion.[3]

I will adopt James's pluralistic attitude toward religious phenomena, though not his emphasis on "experience" as the foundation for the theologies, practices, institutions, and communities that he considers "secondary" developments. For this book, I propose not another new definition, but an old Indic story.

When the gods and the demons churn the ocean of milk they engage in a shared activity. From their quest for some life-enhancing ambrosia that may bring prosperity, longevity, or even immortality, their cooperative action gives rise to a host of remarkable phenomena. I do not want to push the analogy too far, but I propose that we think of religion along similar lines. Shared desires for human flourishing, what Indic works often call simply "the good" or "the highest" (*shreyas*), give rise to all sorts of activities and outcomes that we consider to be religious. These may be codes or guides for virtuous living, practices aimed at self-transformation, rituals and collective ceremonies to gain individual ends or sustain the order of the cosmos, ways of physically demonstrating honor or devotion, programs for creating a just society or a righteous kingdom, myths or stories of the gods (such as churning the milk-ocean), theologies that seek to conceptualize the nature of God or gods, and cosmological visions that try to encompass all that there is. The "highest" may denote prosperity and flourishing in this lifetime and this world, or it may involve some form of transcendence or salvation from all worldly suffering and bondage.

As the gods and demons remind us, these activities do not always arise without conflict. Humans both cooperate and compete, and this is true in the spheres of religion just as elsewhere. Religious practices, we know, can involve exclusions of others. They can lead to oppression and to conflict. They can offer seductive deceptions, too, as Vishnu-Mohini does to regain the elixir.

It is often said that early India had no single word that corresponds to what we understand by religion. India was fluent, as we will see, in discussing the specifics of religious phenomena, but did not choose to envision them as parts of a single bounded category. But this should not be surprising. As Smith concludes in his study,

> "Religion" is not a native term; it is a term created by scholars for their intellectual purposes and therefore is theirs to define. It is a second-order, generic concept that plays the same role in establishing a disciplinary horizon that a concept such as "language" plays in linguistics or "culture" plays in anthropology. There can be no disciplined study of religion without such a horizon.[4]

The question is what one chooses as that horizon. For this narrative history of religious cultures in early India, I propose a deliberately broad one, and one with a fuzzy border. It encompasses not just the single shared desire for immortality, but the multiplicity of cultural phenomena that arise from the quest for the "highest."

Voices and Visions, Lost and Found

This history of early Indic religious cultures will speak, as much as is feasible, with voices from early India. In many cases the voices are recorded in verbal works. Religious texts come in various genres: hymns, poems, songs, didactic stories, epic narratives, scientific treatises, ritual guidebooks, theological discourses. But in this history we will also attend to voices that speak from ancient material remains, including coins, sculptures, inscribed rocks and pillars, built structures, cityscapes. They, too, should be listened to as texts. All these we will consider as intentional works of human labor, articulating distinctive voices or visions, realized at a certain moment in the human past. With early Indian works, we will need to be flexible in what is meant by "a certain moment," for these texts often wish to cover up their own human authorship and historicity in favor of divine authorship and eternality. Assigning dates to ancient Indian texts is often a matter of approximation.

In this approach, I follow the lead of historian Ronald Inden. "We want to think of texts," he writes, "as works enmeshed in the circumstances in which people have made and used them, and we want to see them both as articulating the world in which they are situated and as articulated by it, that is, as integral to the makeup of one another."[5] This way of listening to texts foregrounds the agency or will of those who have created and promulgated them, and at the same time it recognizes the context in which they have been made. It also acknowledges the ways that texts act upon the world, creating new circumstances. It emphasizes what philosopher R. G. Collingwood, in his *The Idea of History*, calls the "inside" of an event—that which "can only be described in terms of thought."[6] But it will be clear throughout that these thoughts are active in the world—whether they take the form of individual programs of religious conduct or great community projects of sacrifice or worship.

To survey such a large period of time, from which an enormous corpus of verbal texts and material remains survive, it will be necessary to be very selective. And this poses a fundamental question: Whose voices do we hear? What visions have been recorded and passed down over time? We need to acknowledge from the start that the main story of early Indian religions available to us is a narrative composed by and about religious elites. To some extent this is inevitable, but it is important to examine and question it.

The cliché "history is written by the victors" is often ascribed to Winston Churchill. He put his aphorism into personal practice by writing a triumphal six-volume victor's history of the Second World War. Whether we accept the cliché or not, we do need to keep in mind that all historical reconstruction of the past depends fundamentally on what exists in the present. As Collingwood succinctly puts it, "The historian cannot answer questions unless he has evidence about it. His evidence, if he 'has' it, must be something existing here and now in his present world."[7] Collingwood's point is perhaps obvious, but it is profound in its implications. Any story we can tell about religion in early India will be based necessarily on those texts and artefacts that have somehow or other continued to exist from then until now. Verbal compositions may have been passed down orally, written down on palm leaves, copied over in manuscripts, maintained in archives, eventually printed in books—and at every moment of transmission there have been decisions about what is worthy of preservation. Unforeseen circumstances—fires, floods, famine, and the like—can intervene to bring about breaks in continuity.

We need to imagine a sociology of textual transmission. Some groups will be in positions to pass on their visions over time, and others not so. To Churchill's wartime analogy, I prefer a genetic one. This religious history primarily reflects the productions, not necessarily of the historical victors, but of those who have been most able to transmit their voices and visions over long periods of time, much as a species procreates its DNA through time. As we will see, in early India this often involves the protracted work of communities who organize themselves around the oral transmission of important religious texts.

What about voices that have been lost? To what extent is it possible to incorporate into the historical narrative the perspectives of those who have most often been marginalized in surveys of Indian religious history? This would include females, lower class communities, and those groups outside the hierarchical Indo-Aryan cultural order. To adapt Gayatri Spivak's oft-quoted phrase, can the subaltern of early India speak? So often subaltern speech has been lost, but in a few cases, we will see, female voices have been preserved intact, such as in the remarkable songs of the early Buddhist nuns. So, too, the vernacular Bhakti literature that begins in early medieval Tamilnadu includes poems of female, low-caste, and outcaste devotees. In other cases, outsider perspectives may peek through, such as in the pastoral ethos of Krishna's tribe of nomadic cowherders told in the *Harivamsha*.

Most often, though, early Indian subalterns cannot represent themselves; they must be represented. We have to attend to the ways marginalized figures and groups are represented within the works of upper-class male authors. Female protagonists like Draupadi in the *Mahabharata* and Sita in the *Ramayana* give powerful voice to their own distinctive visions of wifely Dharma, within epics composed and transmitted by male bards. Other episodes in the Sanskrit epics involve the Nishada hunting-fishing community, living on the borders of Indo-Aryan culture. Nishada characters are given limited speaking roles, but these scenes provide an insight into the relations of ruling Kshatriya elites and marginal communities, as understood and debated by the elites. This is not a history of early Indian religion "from the bottom up," as historians have sometimes advocated, however desirable that might be. My effort in this historical narrative is to integrate some of these often-excluded voices and visions from the lower ranks of a hierarchical social order, in order to tell an expanded and more complete story.

Archeology and art history open up a different corpus of evidence: material remnants of the past that have continued to exist in the present, above or below the ground. These may be the remains of elaborate stupas and stone temples, inscribed stone pillars of victory, coins buried in treasure troves, or fragments of humble terracotta figurines. All these are, as the archeologist Gordon Childe long ago defined it, the "fossilized results of human behavior," and these remnants also need to be interpreted in terms of their purposes.[8] "Fossilized results" also favor elites, of course. They are the ones best able to realize their religious purposes in permanent form: rulers who can have their visions of kingship and Dharma inscribed on stone pillars or plates of copper, well-supported religious communities that enjoy the resources to erect religious edifices, and the like. But we also find, among the material remains of classical India, stone images of "popular" earthly deities like Yakshas and Nagas, alongside those of the pan-Indian images of Buddhas, Jinas, and Hindu deities. Terracotta figurines of nameless little goddesses, suitable for domestic worship, predate the identifiable goddesses who populate the later religious edifices of the pan-Indian religious cultures. Objects underground are not mediated by later transmissional choices. They just lie there, buried, until sometimes they are disinterred accidentally by a farmer ploughing a field, by changes in the course of a river, or by an organized archeological excavation. As evidence of past religious purpose, the Yakshas, little goddesses, and other archeological remnants expand the scope of how we understand the religious cultures of early India. In this narrative, we will seek to listen to the stories these physical objects wish to tell.

The Main Story

This narrative history of religions in South Asia follows a chronological organization. The time frame ranges across two millennia, a very long time indeed, from the earliest preserved texts in India from around 1300 BCE up through the end of the seventh century CE. Since the religious cultures of early India are many and complex, it will be helpful to set out in advance the main story, the plot of this religious history.

After a grounding in the physical and human geography of South Asia (chapter 1), the story begins with the entry into the Indian subcontinent of nomadic groups who called themselves "*arya*," and whom we will call Indo-Aryans (chapter 2). These groups migrated into northwestern India from around 1500 BCE and gradually spread eastward into the Indo-Gangetic plains. They spoke a language related to the Indo-European family of languages, which in the Indian setting developed into Sanskrit, the "perfected" language. Since the Indo-Aryans carefully preserved and transmitted their religious texts orally, the earliest of which they called the *Rig Veda*, we have an extraordinary collection of ancient hymns articulating their beliefs and practices from a very early time indeed. Scholars date the *Rig Veda* hymns to 1300–1000 BCE.

The Indo-Aryans did not arrive into uninhabited space, of course. As recent genetic studies have found, modern Homo sapiens began to migrate to the subcontinent at least sixty thousand years ago. South Asia was already fully inhabited in the second millennium BCE. Various groups of hunter-gatherer tribes lived throughout the subcontinent. Fishing communities and peasant agriculturalists occupied river valleys. Most notably, between 2700 BCE and 1700 BCE, an extensive urban civilization developed along the Indus River basin. Since the 1920s, archeologists have intensively excavated the vast remnants of this formerly lost civilization, but its writing system remains undeciphered. We call this the Indus Valley civilization, or the Harappan civilization, after one of its principal urban sites. Archeologists consider this one of the earliest urban civilizations in world history. Hunter-gatherers, peasant farmers, and the Indus Valley civilization have all helped shape the complex development of religious cultures in India.

As the Indo-Aryans extended their range across northern India, interacting with the indigenous populations they encountered, they developed a complex religious order centered around sacrifice (chapter 3). Over several centuries the Indo-Aryans were able to impose their social and cultural order as the dominant one in the Indo-Gangetic plains. Within Indo-Aryan society, one group organized itself as a priestly class, the Brahmins. They took upon themselves the enormous tasks of transmitting the growing corpus of Vedic texts, officiating at sacrificial rituals, and interpreting the underlying significance of these rites. As Indo-Aryan tribes consolidated into kingdoms, ambitious new rulers sponsored larger public sacrificial ceremonies to reinforce their growing authority. In the period from 1000–600 BCE, sacrifice became a cosmogonic ritual of profound complexity and meaning.

By around 600 BCE, urban civilization began to emerge (or reemerge) in northern India. New cities grew up, especially along the Ganges and Yamuna rivers (chapter 4). In this urbanizing culture, fundamental religious innovations occurred. Within the Vedic tradition, teachers articulated new speculative philosophies about the nature of the cosmos, focusing on individual gnosis and spiritual quests. These were collected in the Upanishads, the final layer of the primary Vedic corpus. Some seekers decided to leave behind the urban culture and became wandering anchorites. These renouncers were called Shramanas. Successful and charismatic Shramana teachers established their own followings. The founding figures of Jainism and Buddhism, Mahavira the Jina and the Buddha Shakyamuni, both claimed to have gained complete liberation or enlightenment, and they organized groups of their most dedicated followers into monastic orders outside the Vedic religious culture.

By the end of the fourth century BCE, a single kingdom, the Mauryan dynasty, established itself as the dominant power over large portions of South Asia (chapter 5). Partly inspired by the earlier Achaemenid empire to the west and by Alexander's disruptive world-conquering incursions as far as the Indus River, the Mauryans styled themselves as imperial rulers. The Mauryan rulers were generally sympathetic to Shramana groups and patronized Jains, Ajivakas, and Buddhists. At the height of Mauryan power, Emperor Ashoka committed himself as a lay follower of Buddhist teachings. Through his extensive patronage, the Buddhist community expanded its reach enormously. This set in motion the dynamic process by which Buddhism became a pan-Asian religious order.

Ashoka's inscriptions speak of the various religious specialists of the time as "Brahmins and Shramanas." From the Mauryan period on, both Brahmins and Shramanas organized themselves as distinct, and competing, disciplinary communities (chapter 6). Smarta Brahmins loyal to the Vedas developed their own austere code of pure conduct and dedicated themselves to teaching and transmitting the Vedas orally and to maintaining a cycle of regular domestic sacrifices. The Buddhist Sangha organized itself as a self-governing mendicant community devoted to the teachings and practices set out by its founder. Notably, both Jains and Buddhists acknowledged (albeit somewhat reluctantly) the religious aspirations of females, and women organized themselves into mendicant communities of nuns alongside the monks. The Buddhist nuns sung of their lives, tribulations, aspirations, and attainments in a remarkable collection called the *Therigatha*, the songs of the female elders.

The Mauryan empire was overthrown in 185 BCE, and in the following two centuries many ruling groups sought unsuccessfully to gain dominant power in the subcontinent. Ruling in Pataliputra (the earlier Mauryan capital) and in Vidisha, the Shunga dynasty was the most significant of these aspiring successors. We call the period from 185 BCE to the beginning of the Common Era the Shunga Era (chapter 7). Material remains from the Vidisha area and across northern India provide a rich image of the multiple religious cultures of this period. These include popular religious cultures centered on Yakshas, Nagas, and other local earthly deities, and domestic cults devoted to "little goddesses." Myriad remains reflect the prominence of a well-supported Buddhist community of mendicants and lay followers in and around Vidisha. Buddhist stupas such as the one on Sanchi hilltop, about five miles from the city of Vidisha, grew up as centers of Buddhist religious activities. We see early signs of a new theistic community, the Bhagavatas, devoted to the god Vasudeva, which would become a major stream of the ensuing Vaishnava religion centered on the high god Vishnu.

In the aftermath of the Mauryan period, groups of bards retold and expanded stories of legendary Kshatriya heroes into two vast Sanskrit epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* (chapter 8). These narratives coalesced over a long period of time, through a complex process of oral composition, but they took on a clear form, as far as scholars can determine, during the post-Mauryan Shunga Era. (The *Mahabharata*, however, remained an open composition susceptible to suitable additions for several centuries later.) Reflecting the dynamic religious culture of the Shunga Era, the epics bring together myriad ideas, practices, and deities within their capacious embrace. The *Mahabharata* explicitly claims to encompass all that there is. But at the center of both epics is an inclusive synthesizing vision. Loyal to the tradition of the Veda and reinforcing the status of Brahmins, the epics imagine an alliance of two elite classes, Kshatriya rulers and Brahmin advisers, pursuing a religious ethics of Dharma to bring about a righteous empire. In a pantheon of multiple old and new gods, the epics elevate the minor Vedic deity Vishnu into a new Supreme Deity. In the new synthesizing religious culture, we see the earliest formulation of what we can call—to apply a more modern term—"Hinduism."

In the first century a new imperial dynasty arose in the northwestern part of the subcontinent and gradually expanded into the Gangetic plains. The

Kushanas became the most powerful ruling group in the first three centuries CE (chapter 9). This was a period of unprecedented international trade, reaching from China to the Mediterranean, and India occupied a key intermediate position in these overland and sea networks. Art of the Kushana Era reflected this cosmopolitan atmosphere. Literati began to adapt the Sanskrit language—formerly confined mainly to Vedic liturgical settings—to new political and literary ends. Buddhist monks took advantage of the trade routes, and the Buddhist order expanded its reach into new parts of Asia. Along with this geographical expansion came new and expansive doctrinal developments, which came to be called the "Great Vehicle," Mahayana Buddhism.

Nowadays the worship of images in shrines and temples is a conspicuous feature in the religious landscape of India. The production of divine images and the development of ritual practices for their worship took shape decisively during the Kushana Era (chapter 10). These innovations probably began among congregations devoted to popular semidivine figures like Yakshas and Nagas, and they were adopted more or less simultaneously by Jains, Buddhists, and devotees of emerging Hindu gods like Vishnu Narayana. Votaries of the legendary pastoral hero and divine incarnation Krishna Vasudeva pioneered the religious sensibility of devotion, called Bhakti. And worshippers of Krishna and followers of the Buddha likewise sought glimpses of their supernal forms in visions. During the Kushana Era, Indian religious cultures broadly adopted a visual orientation.

In the beginning, according to an origin story in the *Mahabharata*, the creator god Brahman authored a massive treatise to instruct humans in the four fundamental aims of life. In this formulation, three of those aims are worldly in nature: Kama (desire, pleasure), Artha (power, wealth), and Dharma (morality, righteousness). Alongside those, another human purpose involved the effort to transcend worldly vicissitudes and gain salvation or liberation. This goal is usually termed Moksha. In the early centuries CE, experts in these matters set out systematic treatises to guide those who would pursue one or another of these aims (chapter 11). These foundational works provide valuable views of the ideals and activities of diverse religious and social groups in early India, such as affluent city dwellers, courtesans, ambitious kings and ministers, pious Brahmins, and renunciatory yogis.

In the early fourth century, the Gupta dynasty established itself in northern India as the dominant power in the subcontinent. The Gupta ruler Samudragupta proclaimed this hegemony by performing a *digvijaya*, a conquest in all directions (chapter 12). For roughly two centuries, the Guptas and their Deccan allies the Vakatakas held sway over a large part of India. During this time, the royal elites and wealthy urban merchants created a new courtly culture, which included the support of Sanskrit poetry and drama. Gupta rulers allied themselves with earlier Vedic ritual traditions and made donations to sustain Brahmin disciplinary communities. They also proclaimed themselves Bhagavatas, followers of the new high god, Vishnu Narayana. Nevertheless, the Buddhist order also flourished throughout South Asia, and when the Chinese pilgrim Faxian traveled throughout India and Sri Lanka in the early fifth century, he encountered a religious landscape covered with Buddhist shrines and monasteries.

During the Gupta Era, a new genre of religious literature took shape. These were called the Puranas ("old traditions") (chapter 13). These prolific new works covered myriad topics and incorporated extensive teachings on a great variety of fields of knowledge. Most important, they presented the narratives, theologies, and rituals centered on the principal gods of Hindu theism—Vishnu, Shiva, and the Great Goddess Mahadevi.

Starting in the Gupta Era, and increasingly in the two centuries after the decline in Gupta authority, religious communities eagerly constructed homes for gods to dwell on earth (chapter 12). These took various forms. The Buddha Shakyamuni in image form could be installed as the head of the monastic community, just as he had been in his human lifetime. So, too, Mahavira and other tirthankaras took on meditative poses in stone images within Jain shrines. Vishnu, Shiva, and other gods of Hindu theism were invited to reside in their human-fabricated homes. These temples gave material form to a new paradigm in Indian religious culture. Gods would be present, in the form of ritually enlivened sculpted images, and could receive acts of honor and homage from their human devotees. The sponsors of these institutions might be kings and queens, members of royal courts, ambitious local chieftains, or other wealthy patrons who wished to honor the gods and also to receive the moral and social benefits of their beneficence. This pattern of "temple Hinduism" would persist through the early medieval period. For the next several centuries, temples became ever grander and more complex in their artistic and architectural design.

The main story I tell here ends around 700 CE. In works of historical narration, choices of endings are always contingent. There is never a clear endpoint to history. Nevertheless, there are some good reasons to stop at this date. In surveying the two millennia from 1300 BCE to 700 CE, we can explore the great variety of early Indic religious cultures, from the poetic visions and sacrificial worldview of the Vedas, through the emergence and expansion of the Shramana communities of the Buddhists and Jains, up to the appearance of new Hindu gods and their growing temples. We see the foundations of three world religions—Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism.

In larger global terms, too, 700 CE marks a point of transition. To the west of India, historians of the Mediterranean world often use 700 CE (give or take a half century) as the endpoint of what they call "Late Antiquity." In the Middle East, the Iranian empire of the Sasanians falls in the mid-seventh century. And most significant, the rise of Islam as a world-transforming religious and political force starting in the seventh century has profound consequences throughout the Afro-Eurasian world. James Laine aptly speaks of the period from 700 to 1700 CE as the "Islamic millennium." "The eighth century," he observes, was "a time in which the foundations of an Islamic civilization was being laid, during which the Arabs ruled a vast, but still internally diverse empire."[9] From the eighth century on, Islamic political and religious groups would make a deep impact on the South Asian religious landscape. The main story of religious cultures in India over the subsequent centuries, from 700 CE up to the early modern era, centrally involves the myriad interactions of the many groups we have designated as Hindu with the complex and equally diverse Muslim community. But that is another story.

South Asian Religions, Yesterday and Today

"India has 2,000,000 million gods, and worships them all," Mark Twain exclaimed in his account of an 1896 speaking tour in British India. "In religion other countries are paupers; India is the only millionaire."[10] Where did this fabulous wealth come from? This book traces the early formation of India's religious fortune.

Nowadays nearly one-quarter of the world's population adhere to religions that originated in India. According to the Pew Research Center's 2012 demographic survey of the "Global Religions Landscape," three of the five largest world religions have their beginnings in South Asia.[11] After the two most prevalent world religions, Christianity and Islam, the survey lists Hinduism as third in number of followers worldwide. Over a billion Hindus live in South Asia, with 974 million in the nation of India alone. Hindus make up nearly 80 percent of the Indian population. Buddhism is the fourth most populous world religion. The Pew survey counts 488 million Buddhists worldwide, 7 percent of the world's total population. Adherents of Buddhism are found throughout Asia, with four majority Buddhist nations in Southeast Asia. The Sikh religion (categorized in the Pew survey as one of the "Other Religions") is probably the fifth-largest named religion, with some twenty-five million adherents across the world—though the Pew demographers admit the uncertainty of their estimates when it comes to these religious "others." Smaller, but very ancient, the Jain religion based in India has about four million followers.

This book focuses on the religious landscape in early South Asia, within which Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism take shape. Alongside these world religions, early India was also the home of other religions, often unnamed, that the Pew survey would have classified as "folk religions." However, the categories used by the Pew demographers, and which we readily use today, tend to hide the contingent historical construction and the internal complexity of these religions. This is particularly true of Hinduism. In one respect Hinduism is one of the oldest of the world's religions, since many modern adherents claim a continuity going back to the ancient Vedas. In another respect, though, Hinduism is one of the youngest members to the parliament of world religions, for only in the nineteenth century did the term "Hindu" come into widespread use to designate a unitary religious faith. In the historical narrative of this book, we will trace some of the multiple strands that have been gradually woven together into what, in modern times, has come to be called Hinduism.

Hinduism did not come into being as a singular, self-developing religious formation. Likewise, neither Buddhism nor Jainism appear historically as separate, autonomous religious cultures. Rather, we will look at them all as interacting groups within a shared, changing social and political reality, in which they may compete with one another for resources and influence. This history of religions in early India will emphasize encounter, interaction, competition, debate, critique, and borrowing among religious communities. In the perspective adopted in this book, religious cultures define and redefine themselves in relation to one another.

1

The Living Landscape of India

LONG AGO, mountains had wings. So we are told by an Indian legend recounted in the epic *Ramayana*. They used to zoom about in the air with the speed of the wind or of a giant eagle. Huge flying mountains, as one can imagine, terrified the creatures on the earth, and even scared the gods in their heavens. What would happen if a mountain landed on you? What if you collided with one in the sky? Finally the gods became so perturbed by the constant threat that Indra, their leader, went on the attack. Hurling his mighty weapon, the thunderbolt, Indra hacked the wings off those mountains by the thousands. With their wings clipped, the mountains fell to earth, where they rest, massive but unthreatening, to this day. The severed wings, they say, still fly about the sky as clouds.[1]

Long ago, another story has it, the river Ganges flowed only in the heavens. It was brought to earth through the extraordinary efforts of a king, Bhagiratha. According to the epic poem *Mahabharata*, this took place not long after a holy sage, Agastya, had drunk the ocean dry. King Sagara had been performing a royal Horse Sacrifice, when the sacrificial horse wandered off into the dry ocean bed and disappeared. Sagara sent his sixty thousand sons to search for the missing horse. These arrogant young princes went about assailing all who stood in their way. But the horses were nowhere to be found. In their quest, the princes dug up the earth and the ocean bed with their hoes and shovels, killing multitudes of creatures in the process, and finally burrowed their way down to the underworld. There stood the horse grazing peacefully, beside the sage Kapila. When the young warriors accused Kapila of stealing the horse and tried to seize it from him, the sage burned them all to ashes with his fiery glance.

Sagara was distraught when he learned of the demise of his sons, and even more so when he realized that, since there was no water, he would not be able to perform their funerary ablutions. Without those rites, he knew, the deceased could not reach heaven. For several generations the ashes lay unconsecrated. Then

Sagara's great-grandson Bhagiratha took on the task of carrying out the libations. He went to Himalaya Mountain and performed severe austerities to win the favor of Ganges, daughter of Himalaya. According to one version, he performed the "five fire vow": he stood on one foot with arms raised surrounded by four burning fires, with the blazing sun as the fifth. After a thousand years of this, Ganges appeared to him and agreed to his request. She would come to earth to wash the ashes of his ancestors. But there was another problem. When the forceful waters of the Ganges fell from heaven onto the earth, the impact might destroy the earth itself. Bhagiratha needed to solicit the assistance of the god Shiva to catch the river in her fall. Again Bhagiratha performed his austerities, until Shiva assented. The Ganges fell, Shiva caught her in his head of matted hair, and she flowed harmlessly through his hair and onto the earth. Bhagiratha mounted his chariot and led the great river to the spot where his ancestors' ashes lay. Ganges soaked the ashes and filled the ocean-bed once again with water.[2]

Mountains with wings, oceans drunk dry and replenished, rivers that fall from heaven—with stories like these, Indians have related extraordinary events in the distant past to explain and give life to the present shape of the landscape. In the modern world we also describe events of the past to account for the geography of the present. Starting in the 1960s, scientists who study the earth's past began to tell a story no less vast or outlandish than those of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*.

Long ago, earth scientists tell us, there was no Himalaya Mountain and no Ganges River. There wasn't even an Indian subcontinent, at least not where it is now. India was created, they say, when a floating island crashed into the southern edge of Asia, tossing up great ranges of mountains, which in turn sent rivers cascading down onto the plains.

Around 250 million years ago, they say, there was just one supercontinent, which the scientists named Pangaea (or "All-land"), surrounded by a single superocean called Panthalassa ("All-ocean"). According to the once-extraordinary geological paradigm known as plate tectonics, now broadly accepted, the earth's outer surface or lithosphere is made up of a few large blocks of cool rigid crust, or tectonic plates, which float on an inner layer of hot, ductile, pliant asthenosphere, like idli rice cakes floating on a thick sambar or vegetable stew.[3] Between 150 million and 200 million years ago, for reasons not entirely clear, the plates that together constituted the supercontinent began to break up and drift apart. First they separated into two massive continents, called Laurasia and Gondwanaland, and then these split into smaller landmasses. Parts of Gondwanaland broke off to float their own ways, staying mostly within the southern hemisphere, and these formed the modern continents of South America, Africa, Antarctica, and Australia. Two other portions drifted northward toward the Asian landmass, and these would become the Arabian Peninsula and the Indian subcontinent. This drift was not rapid, perhaps an inch per year, but spread over millions of years even this lethargic movement can cover large distances.

Some forty million years ago the drifting subcontinent reached the southern shore of Asia, and a very gradual, but powerful, collision began. When tectonic plates with large landmasses collide, writes geologist Tjeerd Van Andel, it is something like driving a chisel into a block of metal.[4] The chisel pushes a triangle of the metal inward, and this in turn forces parts of the metal to fold back and outward along shear zones. India was the chisel, forty million years ago, and as it pushed up under the edge of Asia it forced the land outward. This created the Tibetan Plateau and caused fault lines in the surrounding area, from northern Iran to central China.

The collision did not end there, however. In fact, it continues today at a rate of something like two inches per year. Over the forty million years or so since the initial contact, India has moved some 1,200 miles farther north. This inexorable pressure of one great landmass on another causes compression and crumpling in the earth's surface, which has over time pushed up the enormous range of mountains that Indians long ago named the Himalaya, the "home of snow." Just as the subcontinent continues to move, so the Himalayas keep rising. They are not flying up like eagles with wings, but they are inching upward. The continuing push of the Indian plate northward also creates a vast semicircular zone of seismic instability encircling southern Asia. Devastating earthquakes, such as the one in Kashmir and Kohistan in 2005 that resulted in some eighty thousand deaths, are byproducts of this tectonic movement. So, too, the catastrophic tsunami of December 2004, bringing thousands of deaths to Indonesia, Thailand, Sri Lanka, and the southern coast of India, was caused by tectonic shifts in the Bay of Bengal.

When all that snow melts, it must go somewhere. Over millions of years water has collected on the southern slopes of the Himalayas and rushed southward onto the lowlands. The formation of the Himalayas thus led to the creation of the great river systems of northern India—the Indus, Ganges, and Brahmaputra systems. The Ganges is, as the *Mahabharata* story has it, truly the daughter of Himalaya.

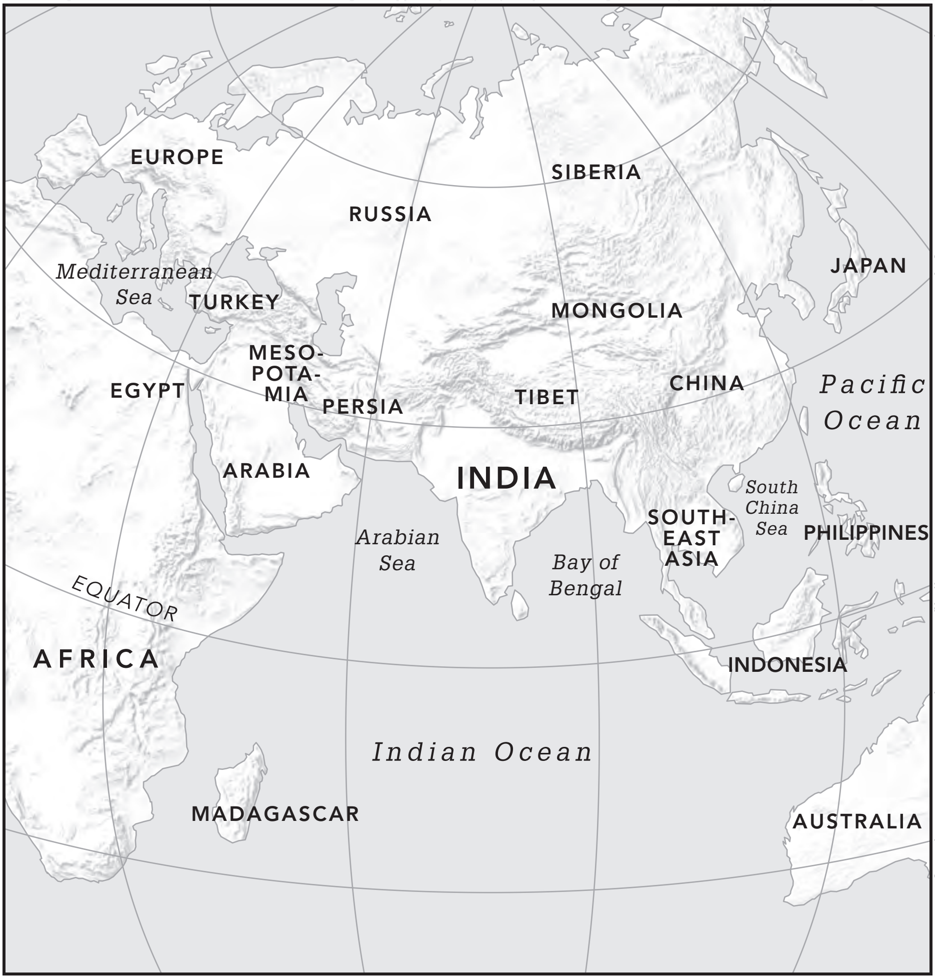
Plate tectonics, like the legends of classical India, does not envision the modern shape of the world landscape as a static collection of elements or a "disorderly set of unrelated events," but rather as a "dynamic whole" with an explanation in the transformations of the past.[5] This notion of dynamic wholeness provides the basis for looking at the principal features of India's physical geography as the changing world within which South Asians have lived. It is also a place of human geography, where humans have over the centuries interacted with their natural environments, both submitting to their conditions and at times transforming them through their physical labors. They have also made it into a sacred landscape, filled with holy sites. And they have engaged with their land in emotion and imagination. In this cultural history of Indian religions, it is apt to give the last word in a chapter on geography to a work of imagination. For the Gupta-Era poet Kalidasa, we will see, India was a living landscape animated by the sensuous intercourse of nature, humans, and divinities.

The Physical Shape of the Subcontinent

The region that geographers call South Asia comprises an area of about 1.7 million square miles and contains the modern nations of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bhutan. Some geographers also include the countries of Burma, Afghanistan, and the Maldives within South Asia, and this brings the region to about 2.3 million square miles, or roughly the area of Europe excluding Russia (**Map 1**). Of course the political boundaries of these modern nation-states are relatively recent, mostly dating back to the years after World War II, when the European colonial powers ceded sovereignty to emerging nations in South Asia and elsewhere. Even the geographical designation "South Asia" dates from the same period, when American geographers sought to develop a postcolonial nomenclature for the regions of the emerging world order.

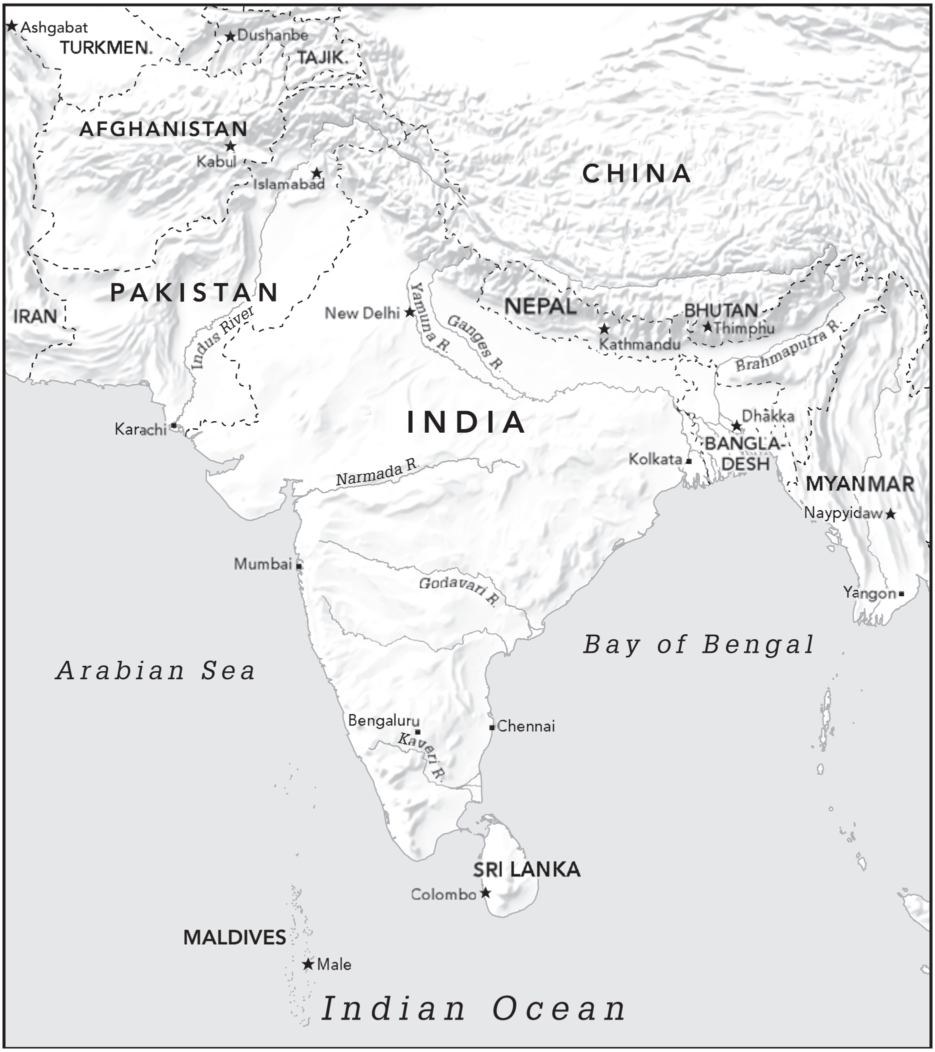
The Indian peninsula is surrounded by sea on three sides. To the west is the Arabian Sea and to the east the Bay of Bengal, both extensions of the Indian Ocean that lies to the south. West of South Asia are the nations of the Middle East, most immediately Iran. North of Afghanistan are the Central Asian countries of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, while China (and most immediately the region of Tibet) border Pakistan, India, and Nepal to the north. To the east are the nations of Southeast Asia, starting with Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos (**Map 2**).

Earth scientists recall the subcontinent as a floating portion of Gondwanaland, and early Indian writers often referred to India as Jambudvipa, the "rose-apple island." In the past, historians have also often treated India as a civilizational island, cut off by seas and high mountains from sustained contact with the rest of the world, at least prior to the arrival of the European powers starting in the late fifteenth century CE. Recent scholarship, however, has significantly revised



MAP 1. India and the Surrounding World

this isolationist view. “The boundaries of historical activity and networks of interaction that have determined the character of change in everyday life in South Asia,” writes historian David Ludden, “have never corresponded to the boundaries constructed by modern cultural authorities or by modern states.”[6] At all periods people of the subcontinent have tied themselves by connections of migration, commerce, and cultural exchange with both neighboring and distant territories. In this book, accordingly, I will stress the ways the people of India have engaged with other parts of the world throughout their history.



MAP 2. Political Map of South Asia

South Asia is a region of remarkable geographical diversity. It encompasses both the highest mountains in the world and great plains of uninterrupted flatness. It includes the Thar Desert, which receives less than 4 inches of rainfall annually, and other areas like Meghalaya, inundated with up to 450 inches of rain per year. Many portions of the subcontinent are too hilly or too arid to support agriculture, while other areas are fertile enough to have sustained intensive cultivation for nearly three thousand years.

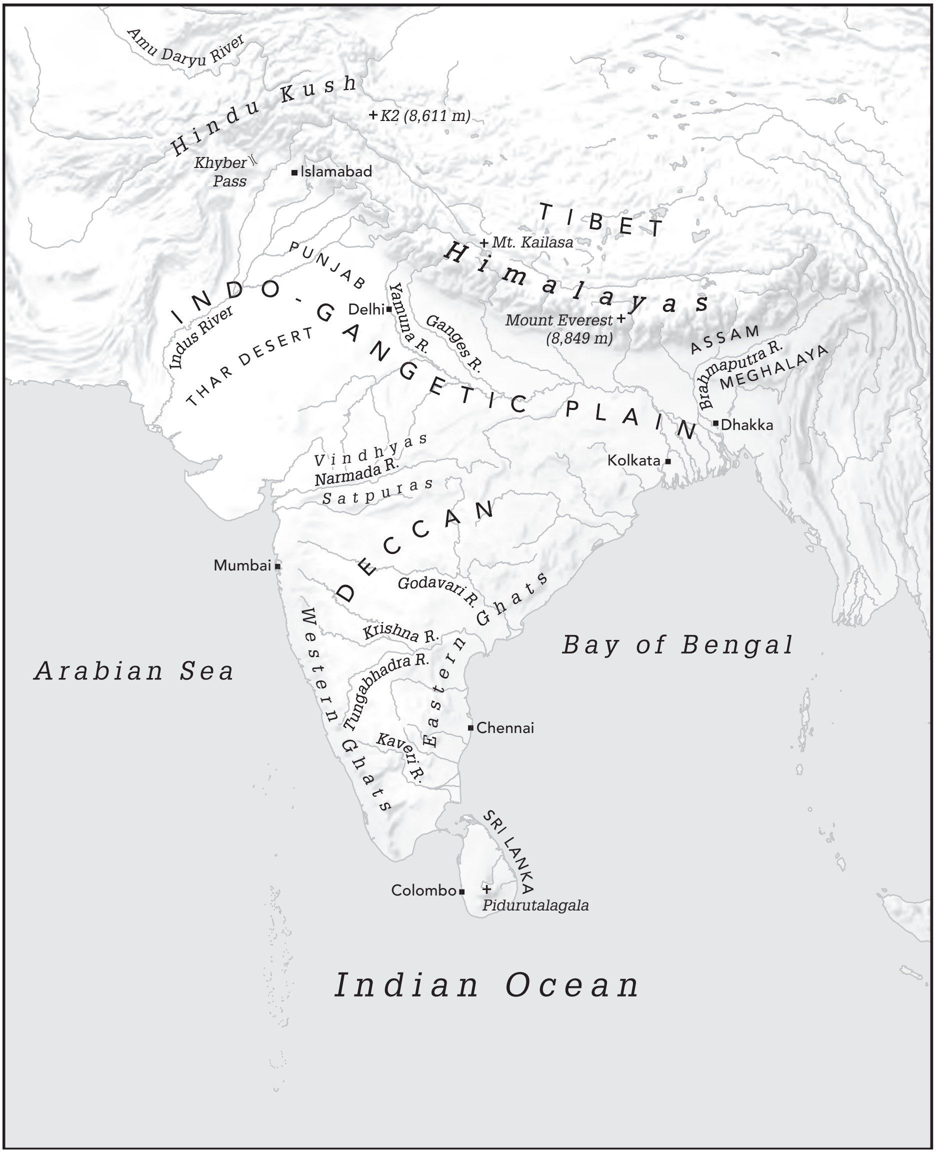
Geographers divide the landscape of South Asia into three principal zones: the peninsula, the Himalayas, and the Indo-Gangetic plains (**Map 3**). All three of these zones derive from the primordial collision of the Gondwanaland plate with Asia.

The peninsula is basically that triangle-shaped portion of Gondwanaland that collided with Asia. Not surprisingly it shares many geological features with other Gondwana offspring, such as South America and Australia. It is therefore geologically the most ancient part of the subcontinent, and it is one of the oldest and least disturbed large landmasses in the world. Geologists particularly love the Indian peninsula for its Archaean rocks, the oldest type of rocks on earth, which date back to Precambrian times, the most ancient geological age.

At the northern part of the peninsula lie two ranges of mountains, the Vindhyas and the Satpuras. Though these are not lofty, reaching about four thousand feet at their highest, in ancient times they did pose a natural barrier to transportation and came to be considered the traditional boundary between north and south in India. Between the two ranges runs the Narmada River, which flows from east to west and empties into the Arabian Sea. Much of the peninsula south of the Vindhyas and Satpuras consists of dry upland plateau. This area is often called the Deccan (from *dakshina*, or the south). Along the western spine of the peninsula, from northern Maharashtra to the southern tip of India, stands a range of mountains called the Western Ghats. The highest of the Western Ghats reach over eight thousand feet. To the west of these Ghats lies a narrow strip of coastal lowland, between fifty to one hundred miles wide. In the southern part of the peninsula, all the major rivers originate in the Western Ghats, flow east, and empty into the Bay of Bengal: the Godavari, the Krishna, the Tungabhadra, and the Kaveri. At the mouths of these rivers are delta regions, areas that have long supported intensive agriculture. Another discontinuous series of hills lies along the eastern part of the peninsula. Highest in Orissa, where they rise 4,500 feet, these are known as the Eastern Ghats.

At the southeastern tip of India, separated only by shallow straits, lies the island of Sri Lanka. Geologically this island is part of the same tectonic plate that forms the peninsula. Culturally, too, Sri Lanka has often occupied the ambiguous role of being both apart from and a part of developments on the nearby subcontinent. The island features steep central highlands, with peaks like Pidurutalagala and Adam's Peak reaching some 7,500 feet, and coastal lowlands around the perimeter.

The northern flank of the subcontinent is dominated by the mountains known as the Himalayas, by far the highest mountains in the world. The highest peaks, Mount Everest on the Nepal-Tibet border and the unimaginatively named K-2 in



MAP 3. Physical Geography of South Asia

northern Pakistan, ascend to heights of over 28,000 feet. Created by crumpling and fissuring of the earth as the peninsula pushes north, they are also the world's youngest range of mountains, and still growing. They form an enormous jagged wall, some 100 to 250 miles wide and over five miles high in places, running some 1,500 miles from the northwest areas of Pakistan across northern India and Nepal to Bhutan and Burma. Modern political borders between the nations of South Asia and those of Central and East Asia, notably China, run across the peaks of the Himalayas.

The highest reaches of the Himalayas, lands of perpetual snow, are uninhabitable. From the vantage point of the lowlands to the south, accordingly, the Himalayas have often figured as a place beyond human reach, the unapproachable home of distant deities and superhuman sages. The Hindu goddess Parvati (literally "mountain girl") is the daughter of Himalaya, and she is said to live with her husband Shiva on Mount Kailasa. Yet the barriers of the Himalayas, while considerable, have never been total. Herders, traders, and migrants have always trekked through the mountain passes, and religious pilgrims have long made their way through the Himalayas between India and Tibet with their Buddhist texts and icons. Even distant Mount Kailasa became a pilgrimage destination for pious worshippers of Shiva in medieval times.

Other mountain ranges extend southward from the Himalayas through Afghanistan and western Pakistan. Most notable of these is the Hindu Kush, while other mountains like the Sulaiman and Kirthar ranges also rise in western Pakistan. Geologically they were formed by the same process of fissuration as the Himalayas, though not quite so emphatically. Passing through the Hindu Kush is the Khyber Pass, often celebrated as the traditional entry point from the west into the subcontinent, and now on the political border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, there have always been several routes of passage between the Middle East and South Asia, including the Bolan and Gumal passes as well as the Khyber. For centuries these have formed the most common point of migration, and sometimes invasion, into the subcontinent until the advent of maritime European colonization at the end of the fifteenth century.

The melting snows and glacial runoff waters flowing south from the Himalayas join to form three great river systems of South Asia: the Indus River in present-day Pakistan, the Ganges-Yamuna system of northern India, and the Brahmaputra River of northeastern India and Bangladesh. The Indus River arises in the Tibetan Plateau, near Mount Kailasa, and flows west between the Karakoram and Zaskar ranges, where it makes an abrupt left and heads south. As it flows south into the plains, it is joined by four other rivers. The fertile plains across which these five rivers flow are known as the Punjab (from *pancha-ab*, "five rivers"), divided now between Pakistan and India. The Indus continues through Pakistan and empties into the Arabian Sea.

The Ganges forms in the Himalayas near the India-China border, as does the Yamuna. Both Ganges and Yamuna descend and flow south into the plains then turn eastward and join together at Prayaga, also known as Allahabad. The land between these two rivers before they meet is known as the Doab ("two rivers"). As the Ganges continues east across India, many other rivers from the Himalayas to the north and the Vindhyas to the south empty into it. Finally, entering Bangladesh, it turns south and drains into the Bay of Bengal.

The Brahmaputra forms in Tibet, not far from Mount Kailasa, where the Indus begins. However, it heads the other direction, flowing east across the Tibetan Plateau, where it is known by its Chinese name, the Yarlung Zangbo. At the easternmost end of the plateau, the river makes a big turn and flows southwest across Assam in the eastern part of India, then continues south through Bangladesh into the Bay of Bengal. Near its mouth it breaks into many distributary channels, which now mingle with those of the Ganges. Together the Brahmaputra and Ganges rivers have created a large low-lying delta that expands with each year's deposit of silt runoff from the mountains. This delta makes up a large portion of the landmass of Bangladesh.

In the ancient Indian iconography of landscape, these great rivers, and all major rivers of the subcontinent, are invested with beneficent qualities. Poets personify rivers as feminine, and Hindus worship them as auspicious goddesses. As in any land where water supply is uncertain and precious, ever-flowing rivers are crucial to agriculture, and they are considered givers and sustainers of life. As life-giver, the Ganges is often addressed as "Mother," and images of Mother Ganges sometimes depict her holding a full plate of food and an overflowing pot to symbolize her abundance. The waters of these rivers also cleanse and purify. Just as the descent of the Ganges purified the ashes of Sagara's sixty thousand sons, so pious Hindus often toss the cremated remains of the deceased into the Ganges to assure success in their journey to the world of the ancestors.

From the Punjab in Pakistan to the mouths of the Ganges and Brahmaputra in Bangladesh lies an uninterrupted stretch of flat terrain known as the Indo-Gangetic plains. Situated between the Vindhyas to the south and the Himalayas to the north, the landscape of the Indo-Gangetic plains has been formed by the deposit of alluvium, the deep residue of silt left behind over the millennia by the rivers that traverse the plains. Once, much of the Indo-Gangetic plains were forest, but they have been gradually cleared over the centuries, and farmers have cultivated the rich alluvial soil intensively so that none of the original forest growth remains.

Historians have often considered the central Ganges-Yamuna basin, termed *Madhyadesha*, or the "middle country," in early times, as the heartland of classical Indian civilization. An area of dense sedentary population, urban culture, and the core region for major kingdoms and empires over the centuries, the Madhyadesha certainly has played an important role in the religious history of the subcontinent. Throughout this study, however, we will see that other regions have also served as important centers of cultural production. Further, we will recognize the participation not just of those at the center, but also of the peoples who live at the margins in the making of Indic culture. There can be no single center of a civilization as diverse and complex as that of India.

Thanks to its tectonic formation, peninsular India has two lengthy coastlines, a western one along the Arabian Sea and an eastern coast on the Bay of Bengal. Historians in the past have sometimes pointed to an Indian notion of "black waters" to indicate a supposed aversion among Indians to voyage beyond the safe shores of home. In fact, sea-borne trade and trading communities have formed a significant part of the South Asian economy and cultural imagination from earliest times. Along the west coast, trade between South Asia and Mesopotamia to the west dates back to the third millennium BCE, and during the time of the Roman empire extensive trade between Rome and India passed through the ports of the Red Sea. The east coast looked out toward the regions of southeast Asia and beyond, to the southern coast of China. As we will see, these sea routes of trade carried more than material goods; religious ideas and cultural products moved across the waters as well. The literature of early India is filled with tales of intrepid merchants undertaking expeditions in search of profits and gold, and the religious history of the subcontinent bears the strong impress of the peripatetic teachers who followed the same routes.

Heat and Rain: South Asian Climate

The plate-tectonic formation of South Asia is also responsible for the most important features of its weather. The Himalayas effectively block northern winds and weather patterns from Siberia, so weather comes up from the south, not down from the north. South Asia therefore enjoys a semitropical or tropical climate. "Enjoys" may be too positive a word, however, for by the months of April and May the heat in most parts of South Asia becomes truly formidable. The sun is searing and the earth grows parched and cracked. Poets speak of the cruelty of this season as if it were some malevolent being.

When the month of May blocks every hope,
when it burns the shrubs and angers the deer,
wilts the trees, weakens the bees, withers the wild jasmine,

> when the streams are dried up and the dust on the ground fried,
> and the sky set on fire with sharp rays of the sun—
> traveler, how can you go on living?
> (SRK 194[7])

Only the season of rains brings relief from this fierce heat.

The dominant feature of South Asian weather, aside from the heat, is the tropical monsoon. This annual phenomenon also took shape, meteorologists believe, around forty million years ago as a result of the peninsular collision with Asia. Basically the monsoon is caused by the difference between land and ocean in their ability to absorb and distribute solar heat. As the radiance of the sun becomes more intense in April and May, the seas surrounding the subcontinent diffuse the heat rapidly while the Indian landmasses become hotter. This leads to a shift in the prevailing winds, and by mid-May the primary or southwest monsoon beings its march from the Indian Ocean northward. (There is a second and less dramatic monsoon, the northwest monsoon, that arrives in southeast peninsular India in October through December.) One arm of the monsoon passes over Sri Lanka and then along the western coast of the peninsula, while the second arm travels through the Bay of Bengal across Burma and into Bangladesh and northeast India. Both arms reach and inundate the southern slopes of the Himalayas. The monsoon brings with it massive billowing black storm clouds, high winds, and torrential downpours. Mawsynram in the hills of Meghalaya, northeastern India, makes it into the record books as the wettest place of all: it receives 467 inches of rain per year. Nearby Cherrapunji was once drenched with 366 inches in a single month.

The arrival of the monsoon has long been a thrilling event in South Asia. Observers watch the great dark rain clouds, “like an umbrella of black silk” as one poet put it, and eagerly await relief from the summer’s torrid heat. The rains flood the paddy fields, fill the streams and reservoirs, and bring the landscape to life.

> Parched from the summer’s heat, the banana tree,
> pregnant with half-grown soft red fruits,
> drinks up the streams from the clouds,
> Its hands folded in gratitude.
> (SRK 258)

The classical poets celebrate all the seasonal marks of the monsoon: not just the clouds, lightning, thunder, and rain, but also the bright flowering *kadamba* trees, the fireflies in the dark night, the white cranes that streak across the sky, the mating calls of the peacocks, the croaking of frogs, and the birds that bathe and play in replenished ponds and puddles. The rains also signal a time of human rest and relaxation. When rain-soaked roads make travel impossible, say the poets, what better time for erotic enjoyment?

> Happy are those who lie,
> nights of the monsoon,
> embracing their lovers, breast to breast,
> in a snug thatched home,
> roof covered with pumpkin vines,
> eyes a little drowsy, listening
> to sounds of the constant downpour
> of rain from the rumbling clouds.
> (SRK 230)

Conversely, to be separated from one's lover at the onset of the rainy season, according to poetic convention, brings sadness and sorrow. For wandering religious mendicants, the rainy season brings an opportunity to rest in one place with others of the same faith in monastic retreats.

The monsoon pattern of seasonal winds has also played an important role in the history of world trade. While monsoon rains made land travel difficult or impossible, the winds of the monsoon could propel sailing boats. Once sailors in South Asia learned how to make use of monsoon winds, they undertook long-range voyages across the sea rather than hugging the coast. According to the classical geographer Strabo, Roman navigators learned the method of using the monsoon from an unnamed shipwrecked Indian sailor, and from then on sea-trade between the Mediterranean and coastal India flourished. In the early modern period, European explorers learned these same techniques from Arab navigators. They adopted from them the term monsoon (from Arabic *mausaam*); they also called them "trade winds," the winds that powered new networks of worldwide trade.

From a geological perspective, South Asia is still in flux, with a floating peninsular plate giving rise to new mountains, new rivers, and even a new weather pattern. But even within the much more limited time frame of human history we can see change in the physical geography of South Asia. Early South Asian texts praise the Sarasvati River in western India as a formidable waterway emptying into the Arabian Sea, while now it is an insignificant stream that disappears into the sands of the Rajasthani desert before reaching the sea. Geographers postulate that rising Himalayan slopes may have redirected some of the mountain tributaries that formerly fed the Sarasvati either west into the Indus watershed or east toward the Ganges basin. Rivers may shift course due to flood or siltation, and some tributaries of the Ganges do so with regularity. The mouth of the Ganges River has gradually shifted eastward, and in the eighteenth century it merged with the Brahmaputra to form a single immense river delta. The Ganges-Brahmaputra delta—which makes up a good portion of the land of Bangladesh—grows year by year as the rivers bring their annual deposit of silt. Yet tidal waves in the Bay of Bengal may abruptly sweep away these deltaic accumulations. Coastlines often shift due to erosion and deposition, and seaports and fishing communities are sometimes inundated, sometimes left high and dry.

Humans in the Landscape

Humans have been part of the landscape in South Asia for a very long time indeed. The earliest evidence of hominids in South Asia dates back some 1.9 million years. Our modern human ancestors, Homo sapiens, began to migrate out of Africa some 80,000 years ago, and some bands evidently entered India between 75,000 and 35,000 years ago. Gradually they dispersed throughout the subcontinent. Nowadays somewhere around a quarter of the world's population lives in the region. Humans have adapted themselves to the natural features of the land, and they have also shaped the terrain in significant ways. Over time some of these human changes have borne unintended consequences far beyond what any could have foreseen. In the present time, we are increasingly aware of the dire global consequences of the profound changes introduced by human activities, especially those of the past two centuries in what many now call the Anthropocene Epoch.

The earliest human inhabitants of the subcontinent subsisted by hunting wild animals and gathering vegetable foods. As with other hunting-gathering cultures worldwide, these earliest South Asians probably lived in small bands of less than a hundred members and foraged over a wide area. They depended on naturally available plants, animals, and other objects and did not amass more possessions than they could easily transport. These hunter-gatherer tribes had spread through much of South Asia by 20,000 years ago, albeit sparsely. However, the subsistence practices of these humans tended to establish an equilibrium with the local environment, and as far as we can tell they did not significantly transform the land.[8]

With the innovations of the agricultural revolution, which reached western South Asia by about 6000 BCE and paved the way for the advent of urban civilization around 2700 BCE, humans took a much more active interventionist role in seeking to control and utilize the land. In the process they began to alter the natural environment in more far-reaching ways. They selected certain species of animals to domesticate for food and labor. In South Asia, indigenous species of humped zebu cattle and water buffalo were domesticated, and the Indian jungle fowl was gradually bred into what we know as the chicken. Other new domestic animals like the sheep, goat, and horse were brought in from other areas. They began to cultivate more intensively some of the wild grain-producing plants. Most significant of these was native rice, which eventually become one of the mainstay crops of the Indian diet. They introduced new plant crops into areas where these plants had not previously grown. Cereal grains like wheat and barley were first cultivated in western Asia and then brought to India as staple crops.

In a land where water may be abundant or negligible, and in a climate where much of the year's precipitation may fall within three short months, humans made efforts to restrain, hoard, preserve, and redirect the flow of water for agricultural uses and human needs. From early times people in South Asia constructed stone dams or bunds in order to create tanks or reservoirs that could store the abundant monsoon rains for the rest of the year. The tank waters were then directed through irrigation channels for use in the fields, which was particularly necessary for rice cultivation.

Perhaps the most far-reaching of early human alterations to the South Asian landscape was the clearing of the forests, particularly those of the Gangetic plains. One who travels across the flat plains surrounding the Ganges and Yamuna rivers from Uttar Pradesh to Bangladesh today sees uninterrupted miles of cultivated fields growing wheat or rice. It is difficult to imagine that these plains were originally covered in forest.

The Sanskrit epics, completed in the early centuries CE, preserve memories of the old Gangetic forests. When Rama, protagonist of the *Ramayana*, is forced to leave his home in Ayodhya, on a northern tributary of the Ganges, he passes from an urban world into the forests in short order. He, his wife Sita, and his brother Lakshmana journey south to the place where the Ganges and Yamuna join, which in classical India was the location of a prominent city, Prayaga. In the poem it is the site of an isolated hermitage inhabited by the sage Bharadvaja. The sage recommends they travel twenty miles farther south, to Mount Chitrakuta, where herds of elephants and deer range through the expanses of forest, and langurs, monkeys, and apes live. The heroes cross the Ganges River and immediately enter a dark thicket of flame-trees, jujubes, and bamboo. The forest is blue-black like a storm cloud, says the poet. They reach Chitrakuta, and it does indeed swarm with birds and teem with panthers, hyenas, monkeys, and all sorts of wild beasts, just as Bharadvaja has described it. The wilderness is dense and diverse. Showing his wife around their new home, Rama identifies twenty-three different species of trees. Though formidable hunters, the heroes live here more like forest recluses. They build a modest hut of leaves and do not make any attempt to clear the land for planting. After the intrigues of Ayodhya court life, Rama positively extols the pleasures of living harmlessly in the forest. "When I gaze at this beautiful mountain, my dear," he tells Sita, "neither expulsion from my kingdom nor separation from my loved ones can trouble my heart" (Ram 2.88.3). Their plan is to return to Ayodhya when Rama's fourteen-year sojourn of exile is over—but events intervene to take the heroes far from their new home.

Not all settlers were so benign in their adaptation to the environment. Humans began removing the Gangetic forest cover, employing fire and iron, during the first millennium BCE. This cleared the way for the establishment of plough agriculture in the rich alluvial soils of the Ganges plains and the growth of new sedentary human settlements in northern India. The epic *Mahabharata* provides an unusually dramatic account of how the land around present-day Delhi was cleared, in the "Burning of the Khandava Forest" episode.

In the first book of the *Mahabharata*, two groups of princely cousins, the Kauravas and the Pandavas, have become hopelessly antagonistic toward one another, for reasons too complex to go into here.[9] While ruling at Hastinapura, on the upper course of the Ganges, the Kauravas find that the best way to placate their contentious cousins, who also have a claim to the throne, is to grant them a portion of the realm. The Pandavas receive the Khandava tract, an uninhabited forest region along the Yamuna River southwest of Hastinapura, in which they are allowed to establish a subordinate kingdom. The Pandavas first build a settlement there, Indraprastha, at the site of the present-day capital of India, Delhi.

Sometime later Arjuna, one of the Pandava brothers, goes out of town with his friend Krishna to relax and sport in the river. While they are resting, a Brahmin comes up to them and announces that he is hungry. They generously offer to get him whatever food he desires, whereupon the Brahmin reveals that he is in fact Agni, god of fire, and he wishes to consume the entire Khandava Forest as his meal. The only problem is that Indra, king of the gods, protects the forest, and therefore Agni requires some assistance in consuming it. Undaunted by the sudden escalation in the Brahmin's request, the two friends pledge their assistance. Agni assumes his fiery form and kindles up a blazing forest fire.

The forest is home to myriad creatures—birds, snakes, hyenas, bears, tigers, lions, and deer, as well as various supernatural gods and demons—and they all pour out of the burning woods screeching in terror. Arjuna and Krishna remorselessly shoot them down as they emerge from the flames, and they toss their bodies back into the fire. The epic poet portrays it as a massive sacrificial offering to the fire god. Indra learns of the conflagration and attacks the two heroes with his thunderbolt, but Arjuna fights him to a standstill. Finally the entire forest is consumed, and of the millions of creatures who once lived there only six survive: the demon Maya, one snake, and four baby birds. Agni is elated. "With eyes blazing, tongues blazing, his great open mouth blazing, his upraised hair blazing, the yellow-eyed Agni drank the melted fat of the living creatures. And when the sacrificial Fire-god received the nectar that Krishna and Arjuna had got for him, he became joyful and satiated, and eased himself into a state of great tranquility" (MBh 1.219.33-34). Arjuna and Krishna are also satisfied with their biocidal efforts, and they sit down to rest after their labors on the bank of the Yamuna with Maya, the demon they have rescued.

In its vivid and violent account of clearing the forest from the Khandava tract, the *Mahabharata* portrays it as a matter of human dominion over nature, with the religious rationale of sacrificial offerings to the fire god Agni. It recognizes the widespread destruction of creatures and the reduction of biodiversity that comes with the decimation of forest for agricultural production, but it does not question its propriety. The poem situates the act as an important step in the process of establishing a new human community within a previously uncultivated territory. After the Pandavas are given the tract and make an initial settlement, the next step is to clear the land of its forest cover. Once the Khandava Forest has been burned and the land is available for the plough, the demon Maya—who turns out to be a gifted architect—constructs a magnificent palace for the Pandavas. With a capital, land, and a palace, the eldest Pandava brother Yudhishthira feels confident enough to perform a *rajasuya*, a royal consecration ceremony that will proclaim him as an independent king.

Agriculture, writes historian David Ludden, "is humanity sculpting the earth, designing habitats, making a landscape as a kind of architecture, and producing symbolic domains that form the spatial attributes of civilisation."[10] But if the introduction of agriculture alters the landscape and provides the economic base for new forms of sedentary social organization, it does not do so on a blank slate. The land talks back. Just as architects must pay careful attention to the characteristics of the site and the physical properties of their building materials, farmers and agricultural communities must also attend to the land, the climate, the plants, and the animals with which they engage. As Ludden puts it, "Seeds, rain, and the soil, like human bodies, have logics to which people must simply adjust."[11] So, in the differing terrains of South Asia, humans may at times transform the landscape, but they also adjust their labors and their lives to the land.

In the river basins of the Ganges and the Yamuna, in the Punjab watered by the five rivers of the Indus, along the river valleys of the Krishna, Godavari, and Kaveri in the peninsula, and in the deltaic regions at the mouths of these rivers, rich alluvial soil has enabled human settlers to practice intensive cultivation of grain crops, like wheat and rice, and to establish settled peasant communities and dense populations. These are the regions where surplus agricultural production and the division of labor first enabled towns and cities to arise in early South Asia. In the arid plains of Rajasthan and in the dry areas of the Deccan, by contrast, the agricultural economy is primarily one of nomadic stock-rearing and herding. Pastoralists may move with their herds, but they also often transport goods and exchange products with sedentary populations. In the central mountains of the Vindhyas and the Satpuras, tribal groups practice shifting agriculture, and in certain jungle terrains of upland Burma, northeastern India, and Orissa, bands of hunter-gatherers subsist much as the earliest inhabitants of the subcontinent must have done millennia ago. Along the peninsular coasts, fishing and coastal trade mix with the cultivation of rice.

Indian poets were certainly alert to this diversity. The earliest work on grammar and poetics in the Tamil language, the *Tolkappiyam* (dated to the early centuries CE), speaks of five "landscapes" as the grounds within which poems grow. These are the mountains, the upland pastures, the agricultural countryside, the seashore, and the desert wasteland. Each is named for a characteristic flower found in that location. A different deity presides over each landscape. Further, each is aligned with a particular bird, an animal, and a type of water. Human activities are part of these landscapes. In the mountain lands the hill tribes gather honey, on the seashore the people live by fishing, and so on. And, key to the early Tamil poetry, each of these landscapes is associated with a human emotional state within an overarching universal love story. The seashore is linked to separation and anxiety, while the mountains form the landscape of lovers' union. In this Tamil system of correspondences, the poet and translator A. K. Ramanujan observes, "a whole language of signs is created by relating the landscapes as signifiers to the *uri* or appropriate human feelings."[12] In the early Tamil poems, humans and their affairs are enmeshed within the living landscape, and reciprocally the elements of the natural world weave themselves into the inner world of human emotions.

While modern environmental issues are beyond the scope of this religious history, it is important to remember that processes of human transformation of the land initiated in early and classical India have borne increasingly serious repercussions. The gradual removal of the Gangetic forests, which began in the first millennium BCE, continued into the nineteenth century with the British construction of railroads. Now no vestiges remain of this ancient vegetation cover in the plains. This has led over time to the depletion and erosion of the soil. With less retention of moisture in the land, flash floods become more likely. Floods transfer topsoil and silt downstream, eventually to the delta. Even the monsoon is affected by the removal of forests throughout the subcontinent, since forests supply the atmosphere with water vapor and thereby replenish the rains.

Sacred Landscapes and Pilgrimage

People work the land, and they can also make it sacred. From ancient times, certain places within the South Asian landscape have been deemed particularly holy. The most common term for such sites is *tirtha*, a "crossing place." (From a verb root meaning "to cross," tirtha is etymologically related to *trans* words in English, such as "transition" and "transportation.") In physical terms, tirthas are places to ford rivers. But in religious metaphor, they denote places where gods may cross down to earth. They are places where humans can cross over from an ordinary state into a sacred one. They are places of transformation. Tirthas are found at river fords, but also in forest groves, along the seashores, on hilltops or mountains, or anywhere that comes to be invested with a sacred power. It is rewarding to visit tirthas. One may gain special religious benefits there. And so the practice of pilgrimage (*tirtha-yatra*), traveling to such holy places, is an ancient and long-standing one. Pilgrimage sites proliferated in early India.

Places may be made holy through association with great religious teachers. Just before he died, the Buddha Shakyamuni advised his disciples to visit four special sites: where he had been born, where he gained enlightenment, where he taught his first sermon, and where he died. Seeing these places, he said, would bring a thrill of excitement and religious conviction. After his death, his followers buried the remnants of the Buddha's cremated body in reliquary mounds or stupas, which maintained the continuing presence of the founding teacher. These also became important places for Buddhist pilgrims. So, too, the community of Jains early on made it a practice to visit five places made holy by the life of their historical founder, Mahavira. Further sacred places came to be associated with previous enlightened Jain teachers of more legendary status. Over time, both Buddhists and Jains developed extensive networks of famous pilgrimage sites.[13]

The epic *Mahabharata* provides an early detailed account of pilgrimage in early India. The Pandava brothers, protagonists of the epic narrative, have been exiled from their kingdom. They are required to live as hermits in the forest for twelve years. They are bored and depressed. The celestial sage Narada arrives at their camp, and he recommends that they undertake a "circumambulation of the earth" to visit its many tirthas. As Narada explains (quoting an earlier celestial sage, Pulastya), pilgrimage is a potent religious practice. Further, it is accessible to all. Vedic royal sacrifices may be powerful, Narada admits, but they require great resources. "Kings can do them, and some rich men, but not others who lack the wealth and the materials needed for sacrifice, or those who are alone and do not have the capability" (MBh 3.80.36). But even poor people can visit the sacred tirthas and gain auspicious results as great or greater than the largest sacrifice. This naturally appeals to the Pandavas, who for the time being are in no position to offer any royal sacrifices.

Narada goes on to promote an elaborate tour that will take the brothers to some 288 places throughout the subcontinent.[14] He describes each tirtha and what makes it holy. In the theist world of the epic, tirthas are first and foremost places made holy by gods rather than by human teachers. Some sites are especially important to one or another of the gods: Shiva, Vishnu, the Mother-goddesses, or others. At some places, a host of divine beings are present. Others are sacred due to some action of the gods or sages in the mythical past. Narada tells the Pandavas what kinds of conduct and what rites are best suited to each place. Pilgrims should control their senses and restrict their diets. They should bathe, offer oblations, give gifts, recite prayers, and honor the gods. He explains the great benefits that result. Tirthas are like ritual amplifiers—they greatly increase the religious value of even simple acts. One who performs the simple offering of water ablutions at the holy site of Pushkara, for example, receives as great a merit as does a king who performs ten Horse Sacrifices.

The eldest brother Yudhishthira agrees enthusiastically to the proposal, and the Pandavas soon set out on a lengthy pilgrimage route that leads them to every region of the subcontinent. Thus the *Mahabharata* projects a sacred geography atop the physical landscape of India, of places made holy by divine presence. Visiting these tirthas, humans can seek to cross from ordinary life into greater proximity to the divine and to benefit from the power this entails. Later Hindu theist works such as the Puranas expand greatly on the places, practices, and benefits of pilgrimage. The *Matsya Purana* estimates that there are thirty-five million tirthas in the three regions of earth, atmosphere, and heaven. That number may be hyperbolic, but it is reassuring to think that gods in the heavens also travel about to heavenly tirthas.

A Poet's Landscape

Humans do not simply work in and on the land. They also observe their surroundings, form emotional attachments to them, and remake them in imagination and art. The geographer Yi-Fu Tuan adopted the term "topophilia," or love of the land, to describe "all of the human being's affective ties with the material environment."[15] This, too, he argued, forms part of the proper study of geography, and he suggested that geographers "might take time off from their practical duties, and join—at least now and then—the artists and the poets in portraying the splendor of the earth."[16] The poets of classical India took as one of their primary themes the splendor of their particular portion of the earth. In their treatment of the Indian landscape they view the natural world not as a domain opposed to or apart from human culture, but as equally part of a rich, diverse, interconnected cosmos. To conclude this chapter on the geography of the subcontinent, let us consider one author's poetic travelogue across northern India.

At the opening of the *Meghaduta* ("Cloud Messenger"), the fourth-century poet Kalidasa introduces his audience to an unnamed Yaksha.[17] This minor deity, we learn, has been exiled for some unspecified offense from his home in Alaka—the Yaksha capital near Mount Kailasa in the Himalayas—to Ramagiri in the Vindhya mountains far to the south. He has also been separated from his beloved mate, who was left behind in Alaka. As it is the time of year when the monsoon is just arriving he feels particularly bereft. Anticipating that his lover feels their separation just as acutely, he wonders how he can convey a message to her. This is when he sees a cloud nuzzling up against the mountain.

The Yaksha realizes the cloud will be heading northward toward the Himalayas with the monsoon winds, and he has an idea. For a brief moment the Yaksha wonders whether it is really feasible to send a message with a cloud. Isn't it just an inanimate object?

> What does a cloud—a mix of vapor,
> flame, water, and wind—have to do with messages
> made to be sent by beings fit to bear them?
> (MD 5)

But the Yaksha nevertheless decides to give it a try. He welcomes the cloud with warm words and flower blossoms and asks it his favor. The remainder of the poem consists of the Yaksha's address to the cloud. He describes the path the cloud should follow from the Vindhyas across northern India and into the Himalayas, he gives directions for finding his beloved in the city of Alaka, and he tells the cloud the exact message he wishes it to relay to her.

The Yaksha depicts the Indian landscape from a cloud's perspective. Yet it is not just an aerial view, such as one might gain from the window of a low-flying airplane. As part of the monsoon, the cloud will interact with every part of the landscape it encounters along the way: the mountains, rivers, fields, cities, birds, animals, humans, and gods who inhabit it. The mountains along the way will welcome the cloud like a long-awaited friend and honored guest, and they will offer it a place to rest when the cloud is weary from its travels. The fields will receive the cloud's rainfall gratefully and will release their rich fragrances into the air. Trees will burst into flower when the cloud touches them with its moist presence. Rivers will offer their fresh water to replenish the cloud after it has spent its rain. As the Yaksha outlines it, the cloud's itinerary is a journey full of engagement with the land.

Preoccupied as he is, the Yaksha envisions the landscape and the cloud's intercourse with it in sensuous, erotic light. Female cranes fly along with the cloud in hopes (as poetic fancy has it) that the cloud will impregnate them. When the cloud visits Mount Amrakuta, the Yaksha imagines the mountain as a "great breast of earth," with the cloud resting on top as its dark nipple. The rivers along the way appear as beautiful female forms.

> On your way, when you meet the Nirvindhya River,
> whose stumbling glide is filled with grace, whose eddies
> make her a navel, whose belt is a clamoring row
> of birds on her swaying billows . . .
> (MD 24)

In the heat before the monsoon's arrival, rivers like the Sindhu have dried up, and the Yaksha sees this as the wasting away that comes from lovesickness, much as he imagines his own beloved emaciated due to their separation. When the Vetravati River hears the soft thunder of the cloud's approach, the Yaksha foresees its "tide ripples like bent brows in a face made lovely frowning" (MD 24). White fish leaping in the waters of the Gambhira River are like the flirtatious darting glances of women attempting to seduce a prospective lover. The Yaksha urges the cloud to submit to the seductive entreaties of these rivers and drink deeply of their savory water.

In the Yaksha's account humans are part of this natural landscape, not separate from it, and they, too, will engage with the cloud as it passes. The Yaksha understands how the breezes, shade, and cooling rains that the cloud brings will give pleasure and relief to women who work in the fields. He also understands that for many people the sight of the monsoon cloud will signal a time of togetherness and love.

> Women whose men travel far roads will look up,
> brushing hair from their eyes to see you crossing
> the sky, their hearts lifted remembering what
> you bring. And what man, when you loom ready to rain,
> would let his woman suffer apart?—unless
> like me, his life waits on another's whim.
> (MD 8)

For those like the Yaksha who are forced to be apart from their lovers at the start of the monsoon, the cloud instead conveys a message of sorrow. Not just signaling togetherness, the cloud also facilitates lovers by lighting their way to nighttime rendezvous.

> There, with a gleam of your lightning like a gold streak
> on a touchstone, you'll show the path by night
> to young women on their way to love
> when the king's highway is muffled in so thick
> a dark a pin could pierce it.
> (MD 37)

The Yaksha approves this assistance to human lovers and suggests the cloud not dampen their passion with rain or alarm them with its thunder. The cloud may also be charmed by human beauty. In the city of Ujjayini, the Yaksha foresees that the cloud will be delighted by the "darting sidelong looks" in the eyes of the women when they are "startled by the glitter of your cleft lightning" (MD 27). The attraction between clouds and humans works both ways.

Along its route the cloud should visit cities like Ujjayini as well as the countryside. The Yaksha celebrates them too, for in his eyes there is no moral distinction between the realms of nature and human culture. In fact, he sees them as interpenetrating, like incense smoke and cloud vapor.

> Incense women use to perfume their hair,
> drifting up through latticed windows, will swell
> your form, and your friends the peacocks will offer their dancing
> for welcome.
> (MD 32)

Women bring flowers into their homes to ornament their bodies and perfume their palaces. There, recommends the Yaksha, the cloud should spend the night not on a mountain, but on the high peaks of the town mansions, and enjoy himself in love-play with his own mate, lightning.

In Kalidasa's world the gods inhabit the landscape just as much as animals and birds, humans, and Yakshas. They dwell in shrines such as the temple of Shiva Mahakala in Ujjayini and that of Skanda in Devagiri. The Yaksha urges the cloud to participate in the liturgies of worship at these shrines. With its thunder it can provide drumming to accompany the evening worship. With its raindrops the cloud can cool the temple dancers and be rewarded for its contributions with their seductive glances.

> The dancing girls there, belts clinking
> as they place their feet, weary hands elegantly
> flicking those fly whisks with gem-studded handles,
> feeling your first drops so soothing
> to scratched skin, will send you, like a flight
> of bees, long sidling looks.
> (MD 35)

At Devagiri the Yaksha suggests the cloud form itself into a cloud of flowers to shower down on the god Skanda.

The gods also dwell in the Himalayas, and when the cloud reaches Mount Kailasa it should again show its respect to the lords of the cosmos. It may circumambulate Shiva's footprints. While the monsoon breezes blow flute-like across the bamboo reeds, the cloud should sound its drum-like thunder to accompany the Kinnara women as they sing of Shiva's great deeds. The Yaksha also suggests that the cloud turn itself into a staircase for the goddess Parvati to walk upon. Even on Mount Kailasa the erotic sentiment is not far away, for the women of the divine court will stimulate the cloud into action by rubbing him with their jeweled bracelets.

> Here heavenly girls will surely
> use you for their bath, your showers
> released by the scratching of their gemmed bracelets,
> and friend, if you can't free yourself from them
> in the hot season, you should scare them
> with your rough thunder while they're deep in their play.
> (MD 61)

The Yaksha expresses his understandable concern here that the cloud not be waylaid too long by these divine women on its way to Alaka, where it is to deliver his message.

Landscape is animated not just by what is present, but also by what has been done in the past and our memory of that. Throughout the *Meghaduta* Kalidasa recollects past actions, as recounted in the epics and other works, that have entered into the present-day significance of the land. Ramagiri, where the Yaksha has been exiled, was also one of the places Rama and his wife stayed during their exile from Ayodhya. Sita's bathing in the streams of Ramagiri, observes the poet, has purified their waters. When the Yaksha describes the cloud's passage over Kurukshetra—the scene of the famous battle in the *Mahabharata*—he recalls the battle with a simile: the cloud's shower of rainfall on the lotuses there reminds him of the shower of arrows the Pandava hero Arjuna rained on the chests of his opponents. When the cloud reaches the Ganges River, the Yaksha remembers how the river descended through Shiva's hair and how it served as a "stairway to heaven" for Sagara's sons. The cloud, too, should drink of its salvific waters.

After its lengthy travels across northern India, the cloud will finally reach the Yaksha capital Alaka. The Yaksha gives the cloud careful directions for finding the home of his beloved and for recognizing her. This gives him an opportunity to depict her state of lovesickness as he imagines it. The Yaksha goes on to advise the cloud how best to approach her, and here he continues to personify the cloud as an intentional being able to adjust itself and interact with other animate beings of all sorts. The cloud should reduce itself to the size of a small elephant and subdue its lightning.

> Small as a young elephant now
> for a quick descent to that pleasure hill
> we spoke of, and settling on its dazzling crest,
> you should flash your glance—the lightning—
> into the house, but most gently,
> like a playful glow of a line of fireflies.
> (MD 78)

The Yaksha predicts that the sorrowful state of his beloved will cause the cloud to shed tears of pity. Waiting at her window while she sleeps, the cloud may then awaken her with a dew-cooled breeze and deliver to her his message in words of gentle thunder. The Yaksha's message is one of forbearance, hope, and anticipation, for in four months he will have completed his sentence and the lovers will be reunited. Finally the Yaksha sends the cloud on its wandering way with a final benediction, that the cloud never be parted, even for an instant, from its mate, lightning.

Kalidasa's topophilic poem celebrates an idealized Indian landscape, animated throughout by an underlying sense of unity and shared vitality. There is an irony here, as the translator Leonard Nathan observes, "for it is the Yaksha's very sense of separation that makes him perceive—on the verge of the season of union—the abiding and joyously intimate connection of all things in nature."[18]

2

Indo-Aryans and the Vision of the *Rig Veda* Poets (1300–1000 BCE)

Agni do I invoke—the one placed to the fore,
   God and priest of the sacrifice,
The Hotar, most richly conferring treasure.
Agni, to be invoked by ancient sages
   and by present ones—
He will carry the gods here to this place.
—RV 1.1.1-2, JAMISON & BRERETON TRANS.[1]

THE VEDIC POET begins his hymn by invoking the fire god Agni. Like the ancient sages, this poet also seeks the assistance of Agni in the ceremony in which he sings this invocation. He identifies this god as the priest of the ritual sacrifice and as the divine messenger who will bring other gods to the present sacrifice. For this reason, the hymnist continues, Agni is a source of good fortune.

> By Agni one will obtain wealth and prosperity every day,
> Glorious and richest in heroes.
> (RV 1.1.3)

And therefore, the poet uses his own insight to seek out Agni and honor him. He asks that the god in turn make himself accessible, as a parent is to a child.

> We approach you, o Agni, illuminator in the evening,
>   every day with our insight,

bringing homage . . .
Like a father for a son, be of easy access for us, o Agni.
Accompany us for our well-being.
(RV 1.1.7, 9)

The religious hymnist who composed this song, Madhuchandas Vaishvamitra, belonged to a group of nomadic tribes who called themselves "Aryas." (We will call them Indo-Aryans.) He composed it sometime in the period of 1300–1000 BCE, when his tribal community was living in the northwestern part of India. This hymn is the first in a collection of some 1,028 similar hymns, known as the *Rig Veda Samhita*. It is a monumental collective composition, roughly equal in size to the complete works of Homer, and quite a bit older. Compiled around 1000 BCE, this is certainly one of the most ancient large works of religious poetry in the world. For Indian religious history, these are the earliest voices we can still hear.

In many ways, this collection of songs, the gods they invoked, and the ritual ceremonies of sacrifice in which they were sung form the foundation for the main religious developments in early South Asia. The Indo-Aryan nomads would eventually settle down and establish themselves as culturally dominant across the Indo-Gangetic plains of northern India. Their religious values and practices were articulated and transmitted in a large corpus of texts called the Vedas. So the early history of the Indo-Aryans and the vision of the *Rig Veda* poets will be the primary subject of this chapter.

But the nomadic Indo-Aryans did not simply move into unoccupied lands. The landscape of South Asia was already filled with groups of human residents: hunter-gatherer tribes, fishing communities along the rivers and seacoasts, pastoral herders, and peasant agriculturalists. There were remnants of one large-scale urban civilization centered in the Indus River basin. All these existing societies would interact with the Indo-Aryans and make an impact on their religious cultures. Before considering the Indo-Aryans and their *Rig Veda*, it will be worthwhile to survey some of these earlier inhabitants, the indigenous peoples of South Asia.

Ways of Life in Prehistoric India

"Indigenous" is always a relative term. It refers to people living in a place before. But before what? Modern humans began to migrate into South Asia, following routes that led them from Africa through the Middle East, around fifty thousand years ago. Over the succeeding millennia, they populated the entire subcontinent. By "indigenous" here, we will refer to the human communities residing in South Asia prior to 1300 BCE, when the Indo-Aryan groups began to enter into northwestern India.

In contrast to the Indo-Aryans with the Vedas, these earlier peoples are not known through their own texts. Rather, what we can discern of their ways of life is known through the archeological study of material remains. These may be found in inaccessible rock-caves or disinterred from the ground. Scientific excavations can provide a detailed portrait of the material features of social life. In some cases, such as the rich and continuing archeological research on sites of the Indus Valley civilization, they enable us to reconstruct in extraordinary detail a large urban civilization whose memory had been entirely lost. From the material remnants we can also begin to infer something of the religious values and beliefs of those societies. And these undoubtedly have impacted the subsequent developments of religious cultures in early India.

India's First Rock Painters

In the jagged foothills of central India, the landscape is dotted with caves and rock shelters. The sandstone ranges of the Vindhya and Kaimur mountains have eroded over the ages into all sorts of formations. Out wandering one day in 1867 among the Kaimur hills in Uttar Pradesh in search of what were then called "gypsy flints," Archibald Carlleyle, an assistant in the Archaeological Survey of India, made his own discovery. Gypsy flints, or "microliths" as archeologists now term them, are small, carefully sharpened pieces of flint or chert designed to be fitted into handles for use as knives, saws, spears, arrows, and other tools, the characteristic product of the Mesolithic period. In his searches Carlleyle found some pleasing flints, but he also happened to spot something else: paintings on the walls of the rock shelters.[2] Carlleyle correctly realized that these paintings were the artistic expressions of the same people who had fabricated the flint tools he found on the shelter floor. Unwittingly he had found authentic Stone Age art in India, similar to the more famous cave paintings of Altamira in Spain that would not be discovered for another twelve years. Carlleyle thus became the first person to discover and correctly identify prehistoric paintings. Later, cave paintings would be discovered throughout South Asia and in southern Europe, northern Africa, Australia, and many other parts of the world.[3]

Archeologists have since found rock-shelter paintings in over a thousand locations in several regions of India. By far the largest number, however, are located in the hills and mountains north of the Narmada River and south of the Ganges-Yamuna system, principally in the Vindhya range. The richest site of all is Bhimbetka, located about thirty miles southeast of Bhopal, capital of Madhya Pradesh. Known locally as "the throne of Bhima" (a hero of the *Mahabharata* famous for his enormous size and strength), Bhimbetka is a large hill whose flat-topped ridge juts out above the forest canopy, looking from a distance like a medieval fortress or the raised seat of a giant (**Plate 1**). Close up, one sees that its steep slopes are honeycombed with innumerable caves and shelters. Some 133 of the shelters in Bhimbetka contain paintings. Yashodhar Mathpal, who carefully documented all the Bhimbetka paintings, copied 6,214 figures from this one site. Within a six-mile radius from Bhimbetka, over three hundred painted rock shelters have been found. And, as V. S. Wakankar, the archeologist who first discovered and studied the Bhimbetka paintings in 1958, points out, we have probably found less than half of the painted shelters that exist.[4]

Archeologists date the largest portion of these rock-shelter paintings to the Mesolithic (or "middle stone") period, which for South Asia is set at around 10,000 to 4000 BCE. Some of the paintings may be earlier, and some are definitely later, as they incorporate elements from known historical periods. By Mesolithic times nomadic hunter-gatherer tribes had spread themselves throughout India. The new, smaller, sharper stone microliths they began to produce during this period represented a major technological advance that enabled the hunters to fashion spears and arrows, and this markedly improved their ability to bring down game from a distance. These are the people who represented themselves and their lives on the rock walls of the Vindhya caverns. Rock paintings reveal to us something of the world of hunter-gatherer tribes who had occupied South Asia for thousands of years before any cities arose.

The rock shelters of the Vindhyas offer protection from rain and sun, and since they are often situated on raised ground they provide good vantage points to watch for animals. Many kinds of game animals abound in the forests around Bhimbetka and throughout the Vindhya hills. Usually there is water nearby. The smoother sections of the rock faces offered a canvas upon which members of the tribes—some no doubt more avidly than others—could set out their vision of life. The painters made their pigments mostly from iron oxides, but they also used other minerals for a variety of colors. They ground the minerals and mixed them with water and applied the colors with brushes fashioned from palmetto twigs. The mineral pigments are remarkably stable over time and the shelters protect them from the elements, so the paintings have been able to survive some eight thousand years. The paintings range in size from as small as three inches to life-size depictions of large game animals like bison and buffalo. Many are complex compositions that portray multiple related activities or large group ceremonies. Altogether, as a composite visual text, the Mesolithic paintings at Bhimbetka and other Vindhyan rock shelters offer a collective representation of the material realities of hunter-gatherer life and of the inner, imaginative realities of their shared world.

Hunting forms a central theme in the Mesolithic rock paintings. Male hunters, often rendered in stick-figure style, armed with spears and arrows, pursue large animals including deer, antelope, monkey, boar, bison, buffalo, tiger, rhinoceros, and elephant. In the Bhimbetka paintings, twenty-nine different species of game animals are depicted, as well as many smaller creatures like fish, frogs, lizards, and insects. Hunting is portrayed as a group activity. In one typical example a band of six hunters surrounds a carnivore and harry it with long spears. Others depict large-scale game hunts involving as many as seventy men. The paintings recognize hunting as an uncertain and dangerous undertaking. The animals often appear enormous, much larger than the humans who pursue them. We see the prey sometimes turning on the hunters, as when a wounded rhinoceros tosses one of his assailants up into the air.

In these paintings hunting is more than just a means of subsistence. The paintings often invest the hunt with a ritual or ceremonial dimension. Hunters wear masks and headdresses. Often the headdresses look strikingly similar to the heads of the animals pursued, suggesting either a hunter's disguise or an identification with his prey. They dance over a successful kill. A "master of the hunt" covered with a decorated body-shield and mask, carrying a basket, appears to preside, shaman-like, over the undertaking and to assure its success. The painters portray animals with familiarity, close attention, respect, and occasionally something like awe. Often the animals' bodies are decorated instead with pleasing geometric designs, of uncertain significance. In Bhimbetka and elsewhere painters have also created composite animals, such as one with the body of a boar, the snout of a rhinoceros, an underlip like that of an elephant, and horns of a water buffalo.

In a tribal hunter-gatherer economy, hunting game may be important, but the largest part of subsistence is usually met through gathering. The mainstays of a hunter-gatherer diet are roots, tubers, bulbs, wild grains, fruits, nuts, insect larvae, bird eggs, small fish, frogs, lizards, and the like. If hunting is a male activity in the Vindhyan rock paintings, gathering is the preserve of females. In this gendered division of labor, the painters were certainly more interested in depicting the men's dramatic dangerous big-game hunt than they were in the mundane but essential female practices of gathering. The Bhimbetka paintings, by Mathpal's estimate, depict 2,076 men and only seventy-one women—though with stick-figure treatment it is not always possible to determine gender. However, they did not ignore women's work entirely. One fascinating composition at Jaora, for example, depicts four women digging out a rat hole and killing the rats as they emerge. Elsewhere in the same shelter a woman carries a basket filled with the captured rats back to the camp. In others, we see people catching fish and turtles with nets, climbing trees to pick fruit, and grinding grains inside their tent-like shelters.

The rock-shelter painters also illustrate tribal ceremonies. Some of these remain obscure, but many feature dancing figures, clearly a central part of community festivities. Dancers wear ornaments and masks. At Bhimbetka, we meet a shaman-like dancer who wears decorative ribbons around his waist and elbows, an antelope skull on his head, and carries two staffs. Shamans may well have played a central role in the magico-religious life of the Mesolithic Vindhyan tribes, as they have in many hunter-gatherer societies worldwide. Dance, like the hunt, is most often portrayed as a group activity. In both, people coordinate individual bodily movement into collective action. The painters particularly like to illustrate line-dancing. In one example we see sixteen dancers, both male and female, wearing long hanging tails, place their hands on the person in front of them and perform a snake-dance, with one unfortunate dancer at the rear of the line taking a tumble.

The hunter-gatherers who painted their world in these rock shelters lived a nomadic life. Judging from anthropological studies of hunter-gatherer tribes, they probably moved in patrilineal bands of perhaps twenty or thirty persons as they followed seasonal changes in the natural world—animals migrating, fish spawning, fruits ripening, monsoon rains arriving. These bands in turn would have belonged to larger endogamous tribes, averaging a few hundred people, that shared common ancestry and common culture. The rock shelters were not permanent residences, though at certain times of the year they must have provided great retreats for tribal gatherings, with their protection from the elements, good views for spotting game, and access to water. It is tempting to think of the shelters as sites for seasonal tribal reunions and collective ceremonies of initiation, marriage, feasting, and dance. The paintings on the shelter walls can be seen as the tribe describing to itself, in visual form, its own deeds and its collective dreams.

It is important to bear in mind that tribal groups following a hunter-gatherer economy continued to live in South Asia throughout early Indian history, and into modern South Asia as well. In the Bhimbetka area, for example, Gond tribesmen maintained elements of their traditional tribal culture well into the twentieth century. In the 1961 census of India, the last in which "tribal" was an enumerated category, there were nearly four million Gonds, and "scheduled tribes" constituted over 20 percent of the population of Madhya Pradesh. The preferred term now is Adivasi, the "original inhabitants" of the subcontinent.

The hunter-gatherer tribes could never be unaffected by changes around them. With the later spread of river-based agriculture and the encroachment of peasant society and early Indian kingdoms, they faced new pressures and choices. They might raid the cattle herds of nearby villages, or barter some of their forest goods for village products like pottery and metal tools. They might see their forests burned to make way for cultivation, like the Khandava Forest destroyed by Krishna and Arjuna, and lose their means of subsistence. They might be forced to assimilate at a menial level into the expanding peasant social order, or they might move out farther into hillier areas not conducive to the plough. Some of these changes and tensions appear in the later rock-shelter paintings produced in early historical times. Here we see warriors mounted on horses and elephants, and others riding in horse-drawn chariots. The threatening newcomers arrive armed with new weapons. Conflict and warfare among humans—not portrayed at all in the earlier Mesolithic paintings—become a recurrent theme. Hunters with bow and arrow square off against fully clothed warriors armed with metal shield and sword.

From the hunter-gatherers' perspective, the advent of peasant society and its warrior-protectors would pose a fundamental threat to their way of life. From the perspective of settled Indian society, reciprocally, the unassimilated tribes would often be regarded as unclean outsiders, dangerous poachers living on or beyond the margins of civilized society. Yet the dynamic between the two groups was not always so simple as this basic antagonism would suggest, and we will return to the uneasy, complex relations of sedentary Indic culture and the "forest dwellers," in later chapters.

The Agricultural Revolution in Mehrgarh

The economy of hunter-gatherer societies such as those of the Vindhya rock painters is a "natural" one, say Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha, in that humans draw their resources directly from what their local natural environment offers them.[5] When humans begin to gain greater control over what the environment provides by domesticating certain animal species and by intensively cultivating certain plants as crops for food and other necessities, this brings about a transformation in their relation to nature. Archeologists speak of this as the "agricultural revolution" and identify its earliest manifestations as occurring in the Fertile Crescent in the Near East around 11,000 BCE. This revolution was undoubtedly radical in its consequences for human modes of livelihood, but it was not so abrupt or complete as the term "revolution" might imply. The introduction of pastoral and agrarian techniques of subsistence was gradual, local, and dependent on geographical factors. Many remained untouched for millennia.

In South Asia there is evidence for the gradual indigenous introduction of agriculture in several regions during the period 6000–2500 BCE. The transition can be seen most clearly in the site of Mehrgarh, in the northwest part of the subcontinent, what is now the Baluchistan province of Pakistan. There, careful excavations carried out over twelve years by a French archeological team reveal the stratified chronology of an early agricultural settlement over a period of some four thousand years.[6]

Mehrgarh enjoys a favorable location. The settlement is situated near where the Bolan River, a tributary of the Indus, emerges from the Brahui hills in western Pakistan and enters onto the Kachi Plain. The Bolan Pass forms one of the ancient routes of human migrants between the Iranian Plateau and the Indus Valley, and before that was no doubt a path for the seasonal migrations of grazing animals between the uplands and the river valleys. As it enters the plains, the Bolan River spreads out and leaves behind rich alluvial deposits during floods. Varieties of barley and wheat grow wild in the area.

The earliest human settlements in the area date from around 6500–6000 BCE, roughly contemporary with some of the rock paintings of Bhimbetka. Mehrgarh was at this time probably a seasonal camp occupied by nomadic groups following the annual movements of animals. They were hunters, and the bone remains found in the earliest strata of human debris reveal the animals they hunted: gazelle, antelope, swamp deer, wild pig, water buffalo, wild cattle. However, there are also indications that, in addition to following game animals, the nomadic hunter-gatherers of this period had also begun to control the movements of sheep and goats. In Mehrgarh this incipient pastoralism appears to be the first step in their local agricultural revolution.

During the period 6000–5000 BCE a more dramatic transition takes place. Mehrgarhians create a new way of life for themselves. In the remains archeologists observe a marked shift in the animal bones. Gazelle bones disappear, domesticated sheep and goats increase, and the bones of humped zebu cattle, the *Bos* *indicus* probably first domesticated in the Indus region, also increase markedly. Cattle become especially prevalent in Mehrgarh and may have served not only as a source of meat and milk, but also as a source of muscle for new tasks such as ploughing fields and threshing grain. By the end of this period, 90 percent of the animal remains are from domesticated species, not wild ones. During the same period there is evidence for the cultivation of local strains of barley and wheat.

Cultivation of grain crops and animal husbandry allow a more sedentary mode of life. The archeological remains of this period in Mehrgarh include numerous residential buildings constructed of mud-brick. These are large symmetrical rectangular structures divided into sections or rooms with doors. Some compartments without doors were undoubtedly intended for the storage of grain. Pottery, introduced during this period, also facilitated the storage and perhaps the transportation of the new grain crops.

From the earliest period, people in Mehrgarh buried their dead. They placed the bodies in their graves either in an outstretched position or with knees drawn up toward the chest. They covered them with red ochre. Grave goods were also included, pointing to some notion of an afterlife. Among them were flint tools, stone vessels, cakes of red ochre, ornaments, and baskets originally filled with perishable items. In two early graves, dating to 6500 BCE, the human skeletons are joined by the skeletons of goat kids, presumably sacrificed as offerings or as further food for the afterlife journey. In other graves are found jewelry made of rare materials, including lapis lazuli, turquoise, carnelian, and sea shell. Such precious items were not available locally. Lapis would have come from the hills of northern Baluchistan, turquoise from Iran or Central Asia, and shell from the Sindhi coast to the south. At even this early date long-distance trade networks linked the people of Mehrgarh with others far from the Kachi Plain. Differences in the quantity and value of goods deposited in the graves also point to differentiation in status or wealth within the emerging peasant society of Mehrgarh. In sedentary social environments, the egalitarian hunter-gatherer way of life gives way to the beginnings of social hierarchy.

After its period of agricultural transformation, Mehrgarh continued to develop and change. The population evidently grew and new settlements were built. New crops were introduced, including oats and a new species of wheat, which must have been imported since they do not grow wild in the area. Most significantly, during the period 4000–2600 BCE Mehrgarh became a center for the production of craft items. Agricultural stability and surplus evidently allowed for a social division of labor, in which some Mehrgarhians specialized in making objects for local use and trade. There were potters who made finely decorated wheel-turned pots. Jewelers used bow-drills and green jasper drill bits to fashion skillful ornaments of lapis, turquoise, and carnelian. Metalsmiths began to work in copper. Another local specialty was the fabrication of small terracotta figurines of humans and animals. In one heap were thousands of fragments, broken arms and legs, with a few nearly intact figurines—apparently a refuse pile for the failures from a terracotta workshop. The scale of craft production in Mehrgarh points to the emergence of other agricultural settlements in the area during this time as markets for Mehrgarh goods.

Although the early agricultural community of Mehrgarh did not produce any collective representation as striking as the rock paintings of the Vindhyan hunter-gatherers, their terracotta figurines are worthy of attention as significant cultural products. Archeologists have found these small clay models from every period of Mehrgarh settlement, from the very earliest times, but the largest numbers were made in later times, roughly 3000–2600 BCE, when potters were apparently mass-producing them for wide distribution. The figurines represent both animals and humans, both male and female, but most of them are females.[7] In one fine example, dated to 3000 BCE, we see the highly exaggerated hourglass form of a female with full pendulous breasts, a stem-like waist, and broad hips tapering down to a point. Her arms are tucked under her breasts, and she wears a broad applique necklace of six or seven strands. Her face is largely nondescript except for two pierced holes serving for eyes, and on each side of her face are waved piles of hair forming an extravagant coiffure. She is recognizably human, but more so. Terracotta figurines of this general type continue into the urban phase of the Indus Valley civilization, and they also bear similarities with figurines from other early agricultural societies in the Near East, North Africa, and Europe. We will see their descendants in later India in the “little goddess” terracottas of the Shunga Era.

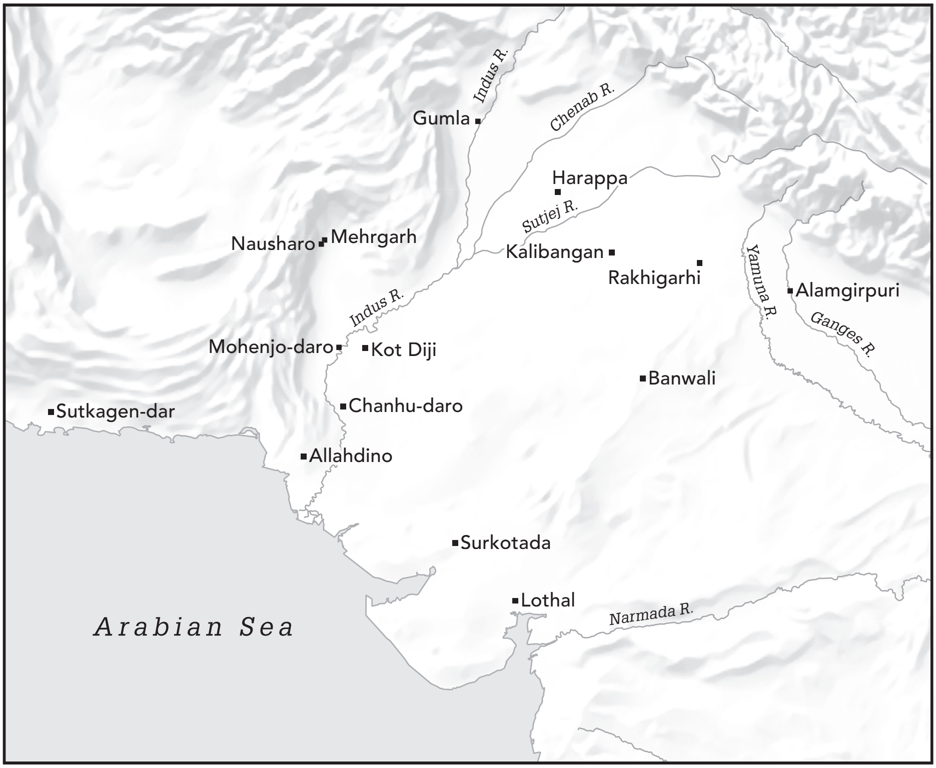
Like the rock paintings of the Vindhyas, these clay objects did not serve any immediate practical end. But the question remains, what purpose or need did they serve? Some archeologists have viewed them as simple toys for children, like Barbie dolls with better hair, but most have considered them, with their exaggerated breasts and hips, to have been “mother goddess” figures associated with fertility practices. The figures are drawn from life but are not simple or direct expressions of life. Rather, they speak also to the anxieties, values, and hopes of the community, in this case those of Mehrgarh and other early agricultural settlements of the Kachi Plains. If the propitiation of threatening animals and success in the uncertain enterprise of the hunt appear as the dominant concerns in the hunter-gatherer rock paintings, in Mehrgarh the need for fertility—in the forms of plant abundance, growth in the animal herds, and human reproduction as well—is the great concern for precarious agricultural communities.

In this shift from a hunter-gatherer encampment to a settled agricultural village to a craft production center, Mehrgarh is just one site. One has to imagine the scenario here repeated, with myriad local variations, in many locations throughout the Indus basin and beyond. Archeologists speak of the period of 5000–2600 BCE as the "Regionalization Era" in the Indus Valley, when established agricultural settlements like Mehrgarh and new villages together developed the necessary technologies, social structures, and networks of trade and communication that would lead to the fairly abrupt emergence of an urban society and state-level organization around 2700 BCE.

Urban Civilization in the Indus Valley

"First Light on a Long-Forgotten Civilisation," proclaimed the headline in the popular newsweekly *Illustrated London News* in September 1924. "Not often has it been given to archaeologists . . . to light upon the remains of a long-forgotten civilisation," began John Marshall. "It looks, however, at this moment, as if we were on the threshold of such a discovery in the plains of the Indus."[8] After this attention-grabbing introduction, the director-general of archeology in India explained that he and his colleagues, R. D. Banerji and Daya Ram Sahni, had recently begun excavations at two mounds in the flat floodplains of the Indus River valley. At a place known locally as Mohenjo-daro, or the "Mound of the Dead Men," ruins covered an area of two square miles, and at the center rose an enormous ninety-foot-high mound of brick and debris, some six hundred feet in length and two hundred feet wide, roughly the size of a modern sports stadium. Three hundred miles upriver, near the village of Harappa, lay another equally immense artificial mound. The archeologists had unexpectedly found artifacts and remains that had nothing in common with any other known antiquities of India. They believed that these were the remains of cities that had risen and then fallen before what had up to then been considered the origin point of Indian history, the arrival of the Indo-Aryans.

Since the 1920s archeologists from Pakistan, India, and around the world have conducted hundreds of excavations in the region, which have revealed over 1,500 sites belonging to an urbanized, centrally organized civilization that spread over some 680,000 square miles, an area larger than present-day Pakistan. The sites are located throughout the basin of the Indus River, along the Sindhi coast to the



MAP 4. Indus Valley Civilization Sites

west, south into Gujarat, and east as far as the upper plains of the Ganges and Yamuna rivers (**Map 4**). They include major urban settlements like those at Harappa and Mohenjo-daro, with populations estimated at forty thousand or more, as well as seaports, regional towns, trade centers, and small agricultural villages. This civilization persisted as an urban society, archeologists now believe, for some seven hundred years, from roughly 2700 BCE to 1700 BCE. Among the earliest civilizations of the world, the Indus Valley civilization evidently appeared slightly later than those of Mesopotamia and Egypt. While it certainly developed trade relations with its contemporaries, urban civilization emerged autonomously in the Indus region, not through external stimulation or colonization. Of all the early civilizations, the Indus Valley encompassed the largest territory. The cultural formation we now call the "Indus Valley civilization" or the "Harappan civilization"—since we do not know what they called themselves—was the earliest urban society of South Asia and the first to leave behind large-scale cultural remains.

When we consider the urban phase of the Indus Valley, it is important to remember, as the *Illustrated London News* reminds us, that this was a "long-forgotten" civilization. There were no later records of its existence, no explicit legacy in later Indian tradition. What we can know of it, then, is entirely based on what has been recovered from the excavations at Mohenjo-daro and Harappa in the 1920s and from the hundreds of digs since then. Fortunately, a tremendous abundance of material evidence has been unearthed. Archeologists have recovered a vast corpus of signs and remnants of life that were inadvertently left behind by the people of the Indus civilization, from plant seeds and animal bone fragments and small fabricated ornaments and terracotta figurines, to the immense cityscapes of Mohenjo-daro and Harappa. They take these material remains as a complex and at times recalcitrant text, and they try to imagine from them the Indus way of life that would have created and left behind these particular remains. Their reconstruction is never final. It changes with new finds, new research strategies, and new ways of rethinking and reinterpreting earlier evidence. Archeologists have learned a great deal in the century since Marshall announced the discovery of the two Indus cities. Yet some great puzzles remain.

What Makes a City?

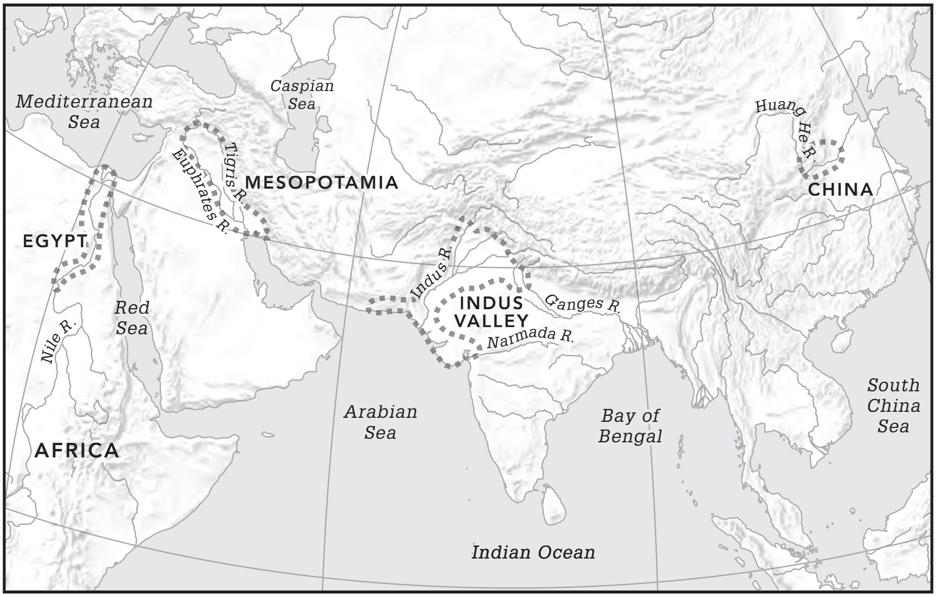
The rise of cities and urban civilization represents a transformation in the mode of human livelihood. Archeologist Gordon Childe long ago spoke of this "urban revolution," following the agricultural one, as a second radical development in human history. "A second revolution," he writes, "transformed some tiny villages of self-sufficing farmers into populous cities, nourished by secondary industries and foreign trade, and regularly organized as States."[9] The emergence of cities rests upon certain preconditions and technologies, it requires new modes of economic activity and collective organization, and it makes possible new forms of social life and cultural production. In South Asia, this has occurred not once, but twice. The first time was around 2700 BCE, in the plains of the Indus River.

The cities of Harappa and Mohenjo-daro grew from smaller agricultural settlements over a period of several centuries. Archeologists have traced the transformations that altered Harappa from a village around 3000 BCE to a regional trading center by 2800 BCE and finally to a large metropolis in 2600 BCE, spread over some 150 hectares and inhabited by a permanent population of forty thousand or more. Harappa and Mohenjo-daro were the largest of the Indus cities, but there were several others: Dholavira on the Gujarat coast, Rakhigarhi, and Ganweriwala along the (now dry) Sarasvati River. Visible for miles across the flat river plains, these cities would have appeared as extraordinary human-built creations. Two- and three-story buildings of baked brick lined the streets of the cities, laid out in neat grid-like patterns. Central parts of the cities of Mohenjodaro and Dholavira were elevated upon forty-foot platforms constructed of solid brick. Surrounding the cities were massive brick walls, with tall gateways giving access to the areas within.

How did this transformation come about? What does it take to make a city? The defining feature of a city is population, a large group of people living in a circumscribed area, but a city requires much more than this. Jonathan Kenoyer sets out four preconditions for the development of urban civilization. First is a diverse food-producing base that can produce sufficient surplus to feed the large population of the city in a reliable way, and a sufficient supply of other resources and raw materials to meet physical requirements. The second precondition is the establishment of networks of trade and communication that enable the cities to exchange commodities and supplies with the surrounding countryside and other regions. Third is the development of technologies necessary to the construction and maintenance of a city. Finally, the fourth precondition is the ability to control access to essential resources. This involves new forms of social and political organization not necessary or possible in smaller, face-to-face communities.[10]

Like other early civilizations in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and China, the earliest urban civilization in South Asia arose in river flood plains (**Map 5**). Here it is possible to grow crops without ploughing, fertilizing, or irrigating. Building upon the Neolithic agricultural innovations in places like Mehrgarh, the Indus cities enjoyed a diverse and reliable supply of food. The staple crop was wheat, and barley was also important. In the coastal regions of Gujarat, rice was also cultivated. Other food crops included legumes and dates. Among domesticated animals, the Indian zebu or humped cattle played a central role in the Indus Valley agricultural economy, as it would continue to do throughout Indian history. The water buffalo was kept for its milk and its muscle power. Sheep and goats were herded in and around the cities. Fish from the nearby rivers formed an important part of the food supply. Finally, bones of wild animals—including wild boar, deer, and tortoise—remind us that hunting and gathering continued as supplementary means of food supply alongside the rise of agriculture and urban life.

Cities cannot produce the food to feed themselves within their densely populated confines, so they must develop trade relations with smaller food-producing villages beyond the city walls. The vast majority of the 1,500 Indus Valley sites so far identified were small villages, with populations numbering in the hundreds rather than the tens of thousands. Their surplus produce circulated into the larger



MAP 5. Early World Civilizations

towns and major cities. Farmers and traders moved their goods on two-wheel carts pulled by zebu cattle, and herders used sheep and goats as pack animals. Flat-bottom river boats carried large loads of produce up and down the Indus and its tributaries. The cities were located at strategic points along the major river systems, allowing them to control the trade routes on both water and land.

The Indus trade networks involved more than just food. The cities imported all sorts of raw materials, including exotic items that were not available locally. Networks extended to the farthest outposts of the Indus civilization and beyond it. Especially valuable were precious stones and metals that could be used in jewelry. Jade was imported from Central Asia, gold from southern India, and lapis lazuli from the plateaus of Afghanistan and Iran. In the cities artisans processed the imported raw materials into useful objects and luxury products of all sorts, some of which then circulated back out from the cities along the trade routes. Sea trade moved from the mouth of the Indus along the coast to the cities of the Tigris and Euphrates. Mesopotamian records of this period refer to the Indus region as Meluhha and list the diverse trade goods that came from there, such as hard wood, copper, and silver. Many of these were luxury items, like fine carnelian beads, pearls, and ivory, destined to be used as adornments for the

Mesopotamian elites and their gods. In exchange, Mesopotamia exported wool, incense, and gold to the cities of the Indus.

Many technologies are necessary to construct and maintain cities, but for the Indus cities none was more fundamental than that of brickmaking. Stone was not readily available in the Indus plains, but there was an abundant supply of clay and mud to form bricks, and plenty of sun and timber for fires to harden them. Hand-formed bricks had been manufactured many centuries earlier at Neolithic settlements like Mehrgarh, but by 2700 BCE brickmakers had mastered the art of molded kiln-fired bricks, which are much more durable. During the urban phase of the Indus civilization, they made bricks in standard sizes that became uniform throughout the Indus settlements. With millions of bricks the cities of the Indus were built.

The technology of urban planning was sophisticated, and it extended beyond Harappa and Mohenjo-daro to the smaller cities and towns. Planners laid out the streets of the cities on a regular grid pattern, along east-west and north-south axes. Street sizes were graded: the broadest avenues were wide enough to allow two-way ox-cart traffic, while smaller streets were half that width, and alleyways one-quarter width. In some cases, apparently, this involved projects of urban renewal. At Kalibangan, archeologists have found an earlier haphazard town layout underneath the regular grid pattern superimposed during the urban phase. Within the cities, the provision of water for drinking and bathing was a central concern. Wells were located both in residential homes and on main streets. Mohenjo-daro had over seven hundred wells, according to one estimate. Another primary concern of the planners was the removal of waste. Latrines have been found in almost every home in Harappa, and the cities constructed sophisticated systems for sewage, with brick drainage channels and covered sewers that carried waste and rainwater out beyond the city walls. No other early civilization mastered so well the technologies of water and waste.

City planning also involved zoning, evidently, with residential areas separated from areas intended for public buildings. In Mohenjo-daro, structures of a more public nature were elevated on an enormous brick platform. This would have protected its buildings from floods and would also have offered a visual reflection of the highly valued activities carried out there, as in the Athenian acropolis or on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC. Among the structures on Mohenjo-daro's acropolis, the most admirable is the Great Bath (~~**Plate**~~ **2**). The bath is roughly the size of an Olympic pool and is made of the best brick and sealed with plaster and tar. The prominent position and careful construction of the Great Bath indicate that it was more than simply a public pool. Most archeologists believe that the bath was used for religious purification ceremonies involving the urban elites. Its centrality evidently reflected both a compelling concern with ritual purity and a social hierarchy in the Indus civilization.

This social division brings us to Kenoyer's fourth precondition: a social and political organizing authority. Clearly, such matters as city planning, uniformity of products like bricks, standardization of weights, and public works like the sophisticated sewage system all reflect the existence of some political authority capable of controlling aspects of collective social life. How did this come into being? The markers most typical of central authority in other early civilizations are conspicuously absent from the Indus Valley remains. There are not great monuments or palaces to aggrandize powerful kings. Nor have excavators found military weaponry to impose authority through coercive means. This has led archeologists to believe that the leaders of the Indus cities exercised governance through control of trade and religion. "Charismatic leaders supported by leading citizens," suggests Kenoyer, were responsible "for the establishment and maintenance of well-planned streets, housing, wells and drainage facilities."[11] Perhaps the unique sculpture of the "priest-king" from Mohenjo-daro provides the image of just such a charismatic leader (**Fig. 1**). He wears a ribbon headband with a circular ornament on his forehead and a similar armlet on this right arm. The cloak draped over his left shoulder is boldly decorated with a repeated trefoil design. This is a small steatite bust, only seven inches in height, but it exudes authority. His haughty expression indicates that he is one whose word would be obeyed. But what exactly were his words?

The Puzzle of Indus Script

Among the many finds at Mohenjo-daro and Harappa, some of the most striking and significant were also among the smallest. In initial excavations at Mohenjo-daro, Marshall reported that they had found 558 small carved stone seals. Another 947 seals turned up in early digs at Harappa. The largest number are square, averaging one inch on a side and a quarter-inch thick, roughly the size of Scrabble squares, with intaglio carving on one face. On the opposite side, most often, is a knob with a pierced hole, so that the seal could be held and strung on a cord for wearing or carrying. Other seals are rectangular, and a few cylindrical. They are made of steatite, a type of soapstone that is relatively soft for carving and becomes quite hard when fired in a kiln. Once hardened, these seals could be used over and over to stamp impressions on moist clay.

Carvings on the seal faces often feature large male animals such as bulls, zebus, water buffaloes, rhinoceroses, or elephants, rendered in a naturalistic and

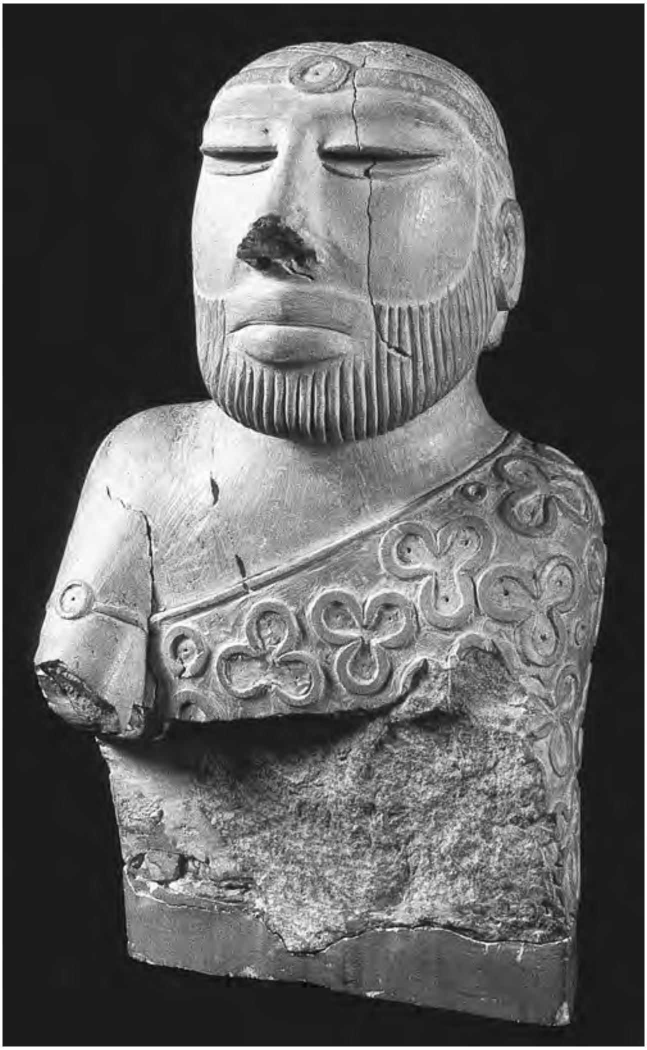


FIGURE 1. "Priest-King," white fired steatite, Mohenjo-daro. National Museum, Karachi. Copyright © J. M. Kenoyer/Harappa.com. Courtesy of Dept. of Archaeology and Museums, Govt. of Pakistan.

sophisticated style. The most common animal, though, is a single-horned bull-like animal that archeologists call the "unicorn." Almost invariably the unicorn is depicted facing a peculiar object that may be an incense burner. In some cases human figures appear, such as the figure in a cross-legged yogic posture (**Fig. 2**). Above the animals or humans appear a row of what linguists call "graphemes," distinct signs or characters. Rectangular seals often have only the graphemes

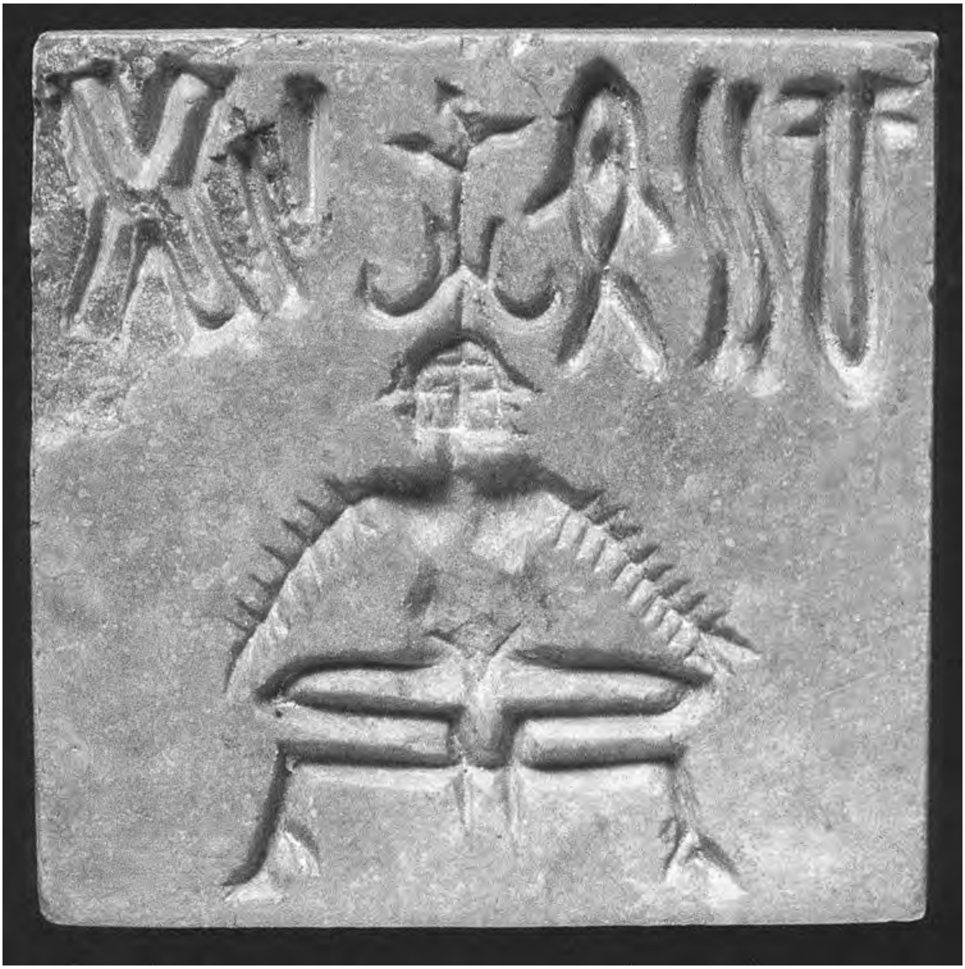


FIGURE 2. Seal with seated yogic figure and graphemes, steatite, Mohenjo-daro. Islamabad Museum. Copyright © J. M. Kenoyer/Harappa.com. Courtesy of Dept. of Archaeology and Museums, Govt. of Pakistan.

without animal depictions. Marshall and his cohorts concluded, and most archeologists since have concurred, that these graphemes are units in a script that was used to write the Indus language. The Indus Valley civilization was literate.

Since Marshall's time, archeologists have recovered many more samples of the Indus script, altogether over 4,200 examples. The script has been found inscribed on pottery, shell, bone, copper, bronze, and gold, but by far the most common medium is the carved steatite seal. The large majority, about 3,700 examples, come from the excavations of the urban centers Mohenjo-daro and Harappa, but examples have turned up at around sixty different sites throughout the Indus region. Over forty seals have been discovered in Mesopotamia and other parts of western Asia, a result of long-distance trade contacts. The script appears to have been invented around 2700 BCE, just at the time the cities of Mohenjo-daro and Harappa were rising to prominence. Writing is a technology of power, and the development of script undoubtedly facilitated the urban integration of the Indus region while also helping reinforce and institutionalize new social hierarchies. But what does the writing say? Therein lies the puzzle.

From the corpus of 4,200 inscriptions, linguists have concluded that the Indus writing system has between 400 and 450 distinct graphemes. The inscriptions generally range from one to twenty characters. The average length of inscription is five graphemes, and the longest one so far discovered consists of twenty-six. So far, archeologists have found no two seals identical.

To decipher a newly discovered written language, linguists must answer a series of questions. What direction does the writing go, right or left, up or down? Indus script, linguists are fairly certain, was meant to be read from right to left, and the seals were carved in the reverse direction, left to right, so as to leave a positive impression. What do the characters represent, sounds or words? Is the script alphabetic, like English or Sanskrit, where the letters indicate spoken sounds? Or is it logographic, like Chinese, where the characters represent words or ideas? Among alphabetic scripts, English has twenty-six letters and Sanskrit fifty, small numbers that reflect the limited number of significant sounds or phonemes employed in any spoken language. Logographic scripts require a much greater number of characters—Chinese has thousands—since they must render a much greater set of things and ideas. Linguists postulate that the Indus script, falling in between these two, is a “logo-syllabic” system, like Egyptian hieroglyphics or modern Japanese, in which a character may indicate a word, a syllable, or a sound. Some Indus graphemes clearly look like pictographs and may represent words, while other more abstract graphemes more likely indicate sounds.

One problem in deciphering the Indus script is that the keys that have unlocked other unknown scripts have not been available. No one has found a bilingual or multilingual Indus inscription, like the Rosetta stone that led to the decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphics. Nor are there lists of Indus kings, gods, or place names in later languages, such as the Biblical and Greek accounts that enabled scholars to unlock Mesopotamian cuneiform. However, the greatest obstacle to understanding the Indus script derives from the purpose for which it was intended, at least in the examples that have been preserved. It is possible that Indus script was used to record lengthy poems or chronicles on perishable materials, but if so, these have been entirely obliterated over time. What we have instead are steatite seals, made of permanent materials, which were used by traders and urban elites to identify merchandise or property. For that reason, the seal inscriptions are short and intentionally distinctive, like signatures or internet passwords. They may give names, titles, occupations, or places of residence. The unicorns or other animals on the seal may represent larger groups, such as clans, merchant guilds, or perhaps cities. Like the Chicago Bears and the New York Giants, we may have seals representing the merchants of the Mohenjo-daro Rhinos and the Harappa Unicorns. It is not an easy thing to decipher a language from a list of names.

Nevertheless, this has not stopped archeologists and linguists from trying. They have attempted to relate the Indus script to other writing systems, including the Brahmi script of early historical India, as well as to scripts outside South Asia, such as Sumerian, Egyptian, Hittite, Chinese, Etruscan pot-marks, and even carvings found on Easter Island in the Pacific Ocean. They have sought to find connections between the Indus language and the principal language families of South Asia: Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, and Munda. Of all the hypotheses, the most widely accepted candidate is Dravidian. The Dravidian languages are at present spoken primarily in southern India and northern Sri Lanka, but there are good reasons to believe Dravidian languages were more widely dispersed throughout the subcontinent in ancient times. One Dravidian language, Brahui, is found in Baluchistan, within the geographical area of the Indus civilization, and Dravidian-derived place names are found in the Indus area. The main language spoken by the people of Mohenjo-daro and Harappa may well have belonged to the Dravidian family. Working from this hypothesis, some linguists have made tentative interpretations of inscriptional passages, but it must be admitted these are not entirely persuasive. The puzzle remains to be solved.

Religious Cultures in the Indus Civilization

In such an extensive and complex urban civilization, no doubt religious cultures were varied and highly developed. Religious practices are reflected in a great profusion of material remains, from the large-scale organization of urban space in the Indus cities to the miniature imagery on the abundant steatite seals. But how do we interpret the evidence? Without access to the language of the Indus Valley civilization, one can only infer or postulate what the excavated remains might mean. We are tempted, understandably, to draw connections between the Indus evidence and developments in Indian religions of later historical periods. These pose intriguing and sometimes compelling affinities across centuries. Here we will take up just a few examples.

Throughout the major urban sites of the Indus civilization, archeologists have unearthed scores of small-scale terracotta female figurines. The figures have accentuated breasts and hips and wear an abundance of ornaments such as belts, bangles, necklaces, and headdresses (**Fig. 3**). Some figures hold small infants in their arms or suckle them at the breast. From the earliest excavations of John Marshall, many observers have suggested that these figurines belong to a cult of the "Great Goddess." The little goddesses, as I will call them, do appear to continue a religious custom that we see in Mehrgarh and other early agricultural communities, and similar terracotta goddesses continue into later historical periods of South Asia. It seems likely that these were linked to religious beliefs and practices centered on fertility, procreation, and abundance. However, it is better not to assume a singular cultic goddess. More likely these figurines were domestic and local in their usage and in their identity. Over the course of this book, we will explore the complexity of female divinity in Indian religious history, including localized earthly deities like Yakshis, the beginnings of specific pan-Indian goddesses like Shri Lakshmi and Durga, and the first articulation of a theology of a unitary Great Goddess in early medieval Hindu theism. There is no necessary reason to jump the gun from the Indus civilization when it comes to goddess traditions of India.

A number of seals depict a male figure seated on a low bench, with legs spread and folded back, in a challenging yogic posture. Often his penis is erect. His arms are covered in bangles, and he wears a headdress of spreading buffalo horns with a central feather or tree-branch. In one particularly fascinating seal from Mohenjo-daro, the figure is surrounded by four animals: rhinoceros, water buffalo, elephant, and tiger. Below the bench are two antelopes (**Fig. 4**). The seal has undeciphered Indus script along the top. These yoga-posture male figures are often identified as "proto-Shiva," the earliest appearance of a deity who becomes central in later forms of Hindu theism. In his later identity, Shiva is often associated with yoga practices. And Shiva comes to be identified as Pashupati, the "Lord of Animals," so some observers label the seated figure surrounded by representative animals as the proto-Pashupati. Did residents of Mohenjo-daro worship the ancestor of the Hindu god Shiva?

Another steatite seal found in Mohenjo-daro excavations depicts a complex scene, evidently a religious ceremony of some kind. Despite its small size, about

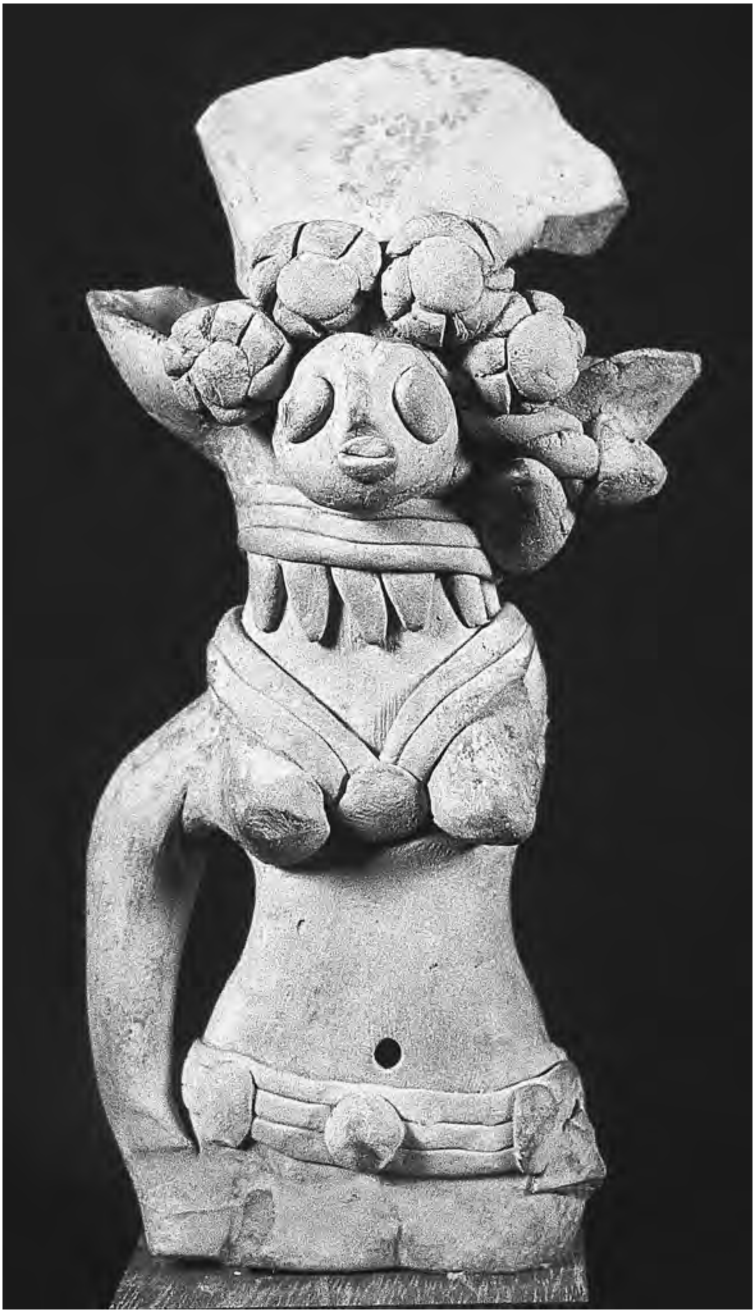


FIGURE 3. Female Figurine, terracotta, Harappa. National Museum, Karachi. Copyright © J. M. Kenoyer/Harappa.com. Courtesy of Dept. of Archaeology and Museums, Govt. of Pakistan.

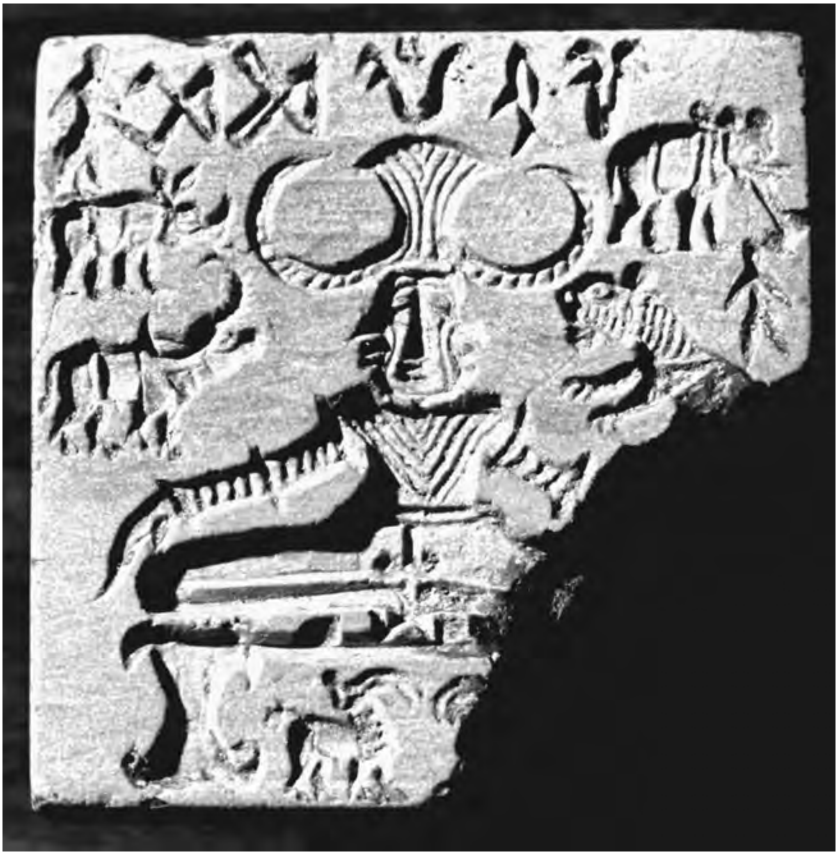


FIGURE 4. "Proto-Shiva" seated figure on steatite seal, surrounded by animals, Mohenjo-daro, ca. 2100–1750 BCE. National Museum, Delhi. Photo by John C. Huntington. Courtesy of the John C. and Susan L. Huntington Photographic Archive of Buddhist and Asian Art.

1½ inches square, there is abundant detail (**Fig. 5**). In the upper left, a female deity stands in a pipal tree. The tree is divided into two main trunks, with the deity between them. She wears a horned headdress with curved branches in the center, and her arms are covered in bangles. Her head is seen in profile facing right, and her hair forms a long hanging braid behind her. To her right, a female kneels in apparent devotion. The votary also wears a horned headdress and likewise has a long braid down her back. Behind her stands a massive ram. In the lower part of the seal, seven robed female figures walk in procession to the right. They wear plumed head covers, without the horns. They have long braids, and their arms

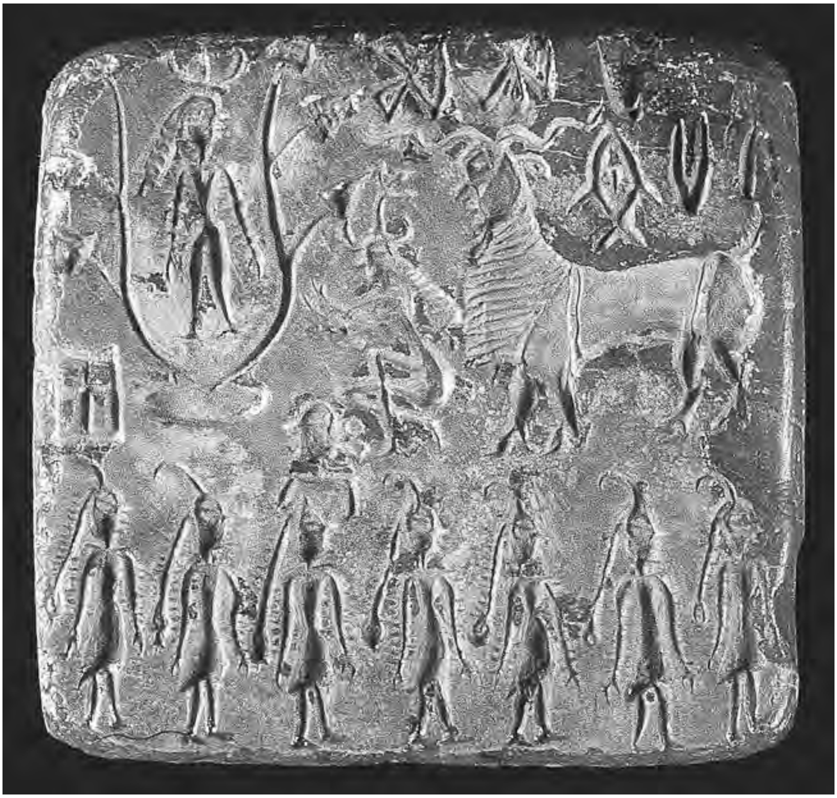


FIGURE 5. Female Deity in pipal tree, steatite seal, Mohenjo-daro. Islamabad Museum. Copyright © J. M. Kenoyer/Harappa.com, Courtesy of Dept. of Archaeology and Museums, Govt. of Pakistan.

are also encased in bangles. A few characters of Indus script are inserted across the top of the seal. What kind of ceremony is this? Is it the worship of a tree goddess, the ancestor of a Yakshi? Or does she represent the spirit of the sacred pipal tree itself? Is the ram a sacrificial offering? Are the seven figures below priestesses, as some have suggested? As a "long-forgotten" civilization, the religious culture of the Indus Valley civilization leaves us with numerous questions and tantalizing but unproven connections.

At some point around 1700 BCE, the central organizing agencies of the urban civilization began to lose their grip. It is not clear what caused the demise. There are no signs of external conquest. More likely factors were environmental crises: shifts in river courses, floods, droughts, crop failures. These evidently undermined the authority of the ruling elites. But the populations certainly did not die out.

Archeologists call this the "localization" phase or the post-urban settlement period of the Indus Valley. Some technologies did disappear, such as the use of steatite seals and the uniform brickmaking. But many of the practices and customs of the Indus region continued. Though long-distance trade may have diminished, local agricultural practices persisted. There were no longer elites capable of constructing a Great Bath, but the domestic and local practices to ensure fertility and human flourishing continued. Earlier scholars postulated a clearcut break in the lost civilization, but archeologists now point more to cultural continuities between the Indus Valley civilization and subsequent Indian history that begins with the Indo-Aryans.

Migrations of the Indo-Aryans

"Nor can we reasonably doubt, how degenerate and abased so ever the Hindus may now appear, that in some early age they were splendid in arts and arms, happy in government, wise in legislation, and eminent in various knowledge."[12] Speaking to the small group of British colonial officials who made up the Asiatic Society of Calcutta in February 1786, the president of the group, William Jones, went on to make some surprising claims about Sanskrit, the ancient language of India.

> The *Sanscrit* language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than the *Greek*, more copious than the *Latin*, and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and in the forms of grammar, than could possibly have been produced by accident; so strong indeed, that no philosopher could examine them all three, without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists: there is a similar reason, though not quite so forcible, for supposing that both the *Gothick* and the *Celtick*, though blended with a very different idiom, had the same origin with the *Sanscrit*; and the old *Persian* might be added to the same family.[13]

Jones postulated that the family resemblances of these languages must have resulted from a geographical dispersal of peoples from some central country.

The Indo-Europeans

William Jones was right. The Sanskrit language is incontestably related to Greek and Latin. So, too, is it related to old Persian, as well as to the Celtic language and the Gothic or Old Germanic. In addition, the languages descended from them—including the modern languages of northern India such as Hindi and Bengali from Sanskrit; the contemporary Romance languages like French and Spanish from Latin; and northern European languages like English and modern German from old Germanic—all share a common linguistic ancestor, which linguists call "Proto-Indo-European," or PIE for short. Still others which Jones did not notice also belong to this extended family of languages, most notably the Balto-Slavic group that includes Russian, Czech, and Polish, and the Anatolian group that encompasses the ancient languages Hittite and Lycian. Altogether, linguists identify some 140 languages that derive from an original Proto-Indo-European. It is a remarkable, far-flung family indeed. At present over two billion people, roughly half the world's population, speak an Indo-European language.

How did this come about? Most scholars assume that long ago, at least five or six thousand years back, groups speaking a common language and inhabiting some common territory must have begun migrating in several directions. Eventually others in the new territories they occupied also adopted their languages. As these groups spread geographically, their once-common language diverged into separate "stocks" that developed into new localized languages, which linguists designate "daughter languages." While these derivative languages naturally changed over time and incorporated loan words and new features from other non-Indo-European languages, they also retained enough vocabulary and grammar in common that their shared ancestry can be recognized. Through a process of inferring backward, from the later known languages to an earlier unknown source, linguists have attempted to reconstruct the originating Proto-Indo-European language. A linguist supplied with training in this reconstructed PIE and a time machine might plausibly be able to converse with the Indo-Europeans of six thousand years ago. One noted nineteenth-century philologist, August Schleicher, even composed a folktale, *Avis akvasas ka* ("The sheep and the horses"), meant for an audience of PIE speakers.

However, this hypothesis of a primordial partitioning of a once-unitary community of Proto-Indo-European speakers raises many new questions. Where did they come from? Why did they leave? If they shared a linguistic heritage, what else did they share? Is there a common Indo-European protoculture? How were they so successful in imposing their languages in new lands? What other aspects of culture did they impose? And to what extent did they remain, in their new territories, distinct ethnic communities? These are beyond the scope of this book, but we can make a few observations about the earliest Indo-Europeans, as the ancestors of the Indo-Aryans.[14]

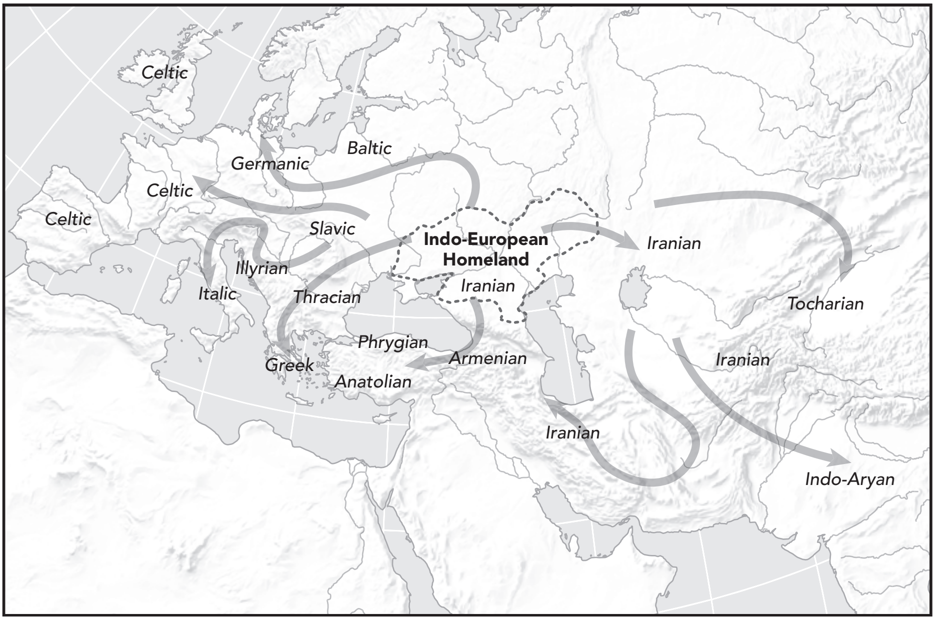
Early Indo-European society appears to have been hierarchical, with an elite strata of chieftains, warriors, and priests, and a lower class of common people. Family organization was clearly central to social structure, as indicated by broadly shared and extensive kinship terminology. Families were patriarchal. Marriages were arranged between partners outside of each other's kin group, and a new wife went to live with her husband's family. It is more difficult to ascertain more encompassing levels of social organization within Indo-European culture, since there are few if any shared terms. Many scholars assume that extended families formed "clans," which were in turn grouped within "tribes." One word that does seem to be widely shared is **raj*, an individual leader of a group. This is the form for the later Sanskrit term *rajan* (king), as well as Latin *rex* and such English derivatives as "regal" and "reign." However, for a nomadic tribal society such as the Indo-European, "chieftain" is a more suitable translation than "king."

The Indo-Europeans knew agriculture, as indicated by shared terms for plow and other agricultural implements. However, the mainstay of the material economy was stockbreeding. The Indo-Europeans kept domesticated sheep, goats, cows, and oxen. Cattle were crucial for their meat, their hides, their bones and horns, their dairy products, and their strength in pulling plows. Dogs had made themselves useful members of the Indo-European community by protecting the herds of livestock from predators. The most distinctive animal domesticated by the Indo-Europeans, though, was the horse. From the PIE word for horse, **ekwos*, come the Sanskrit *ashva* and the Latin *equus*, as well as the English word "equestrian" for one who rides a horse. The Indo-Europeans were the first to domesticate the horse, both for riding and transportation. This new technology posed many advantages. With horses, they could transport goods more quickly, control larger herds of livestock, scout farther afield for new pastures, and carry out quicker and more successful cattle raids on neighbors. The Indo-European peoples also knew the wheel and developed wheeled vehicles pulled by draft animals. Paired with the domestication of the horse, wheeled transport allowed much greater mobility and no doubt facilitated the wide-ranging migrations of the Indo-European groups over the succeeding centuries. Conversely, shared terminology for built structures like houses is relatively sparse. This, too, points to a pastoral and nomadic or semisettled mode of life among the Indo-Europeans.

The religious world of the Indo-Europeans revolved around a pantheon of gods, predominantly male, who were often described as "shining" like the bright sky. Deities were distinguished as immortal in contrast to mortal humans, and as dwellers of the sky in contrast to earth-bound humans. Some were identified with natural phenomena, like the fire god Agni, but this was not primitive "nature worship," as earlier religious historians classified it. Certain narratives of divine deeds seem to be widely shared among Indo-European cultures, such as the "dragon-slaying" myth. Throughout Indo-European traditions, we hear repeatedly of a hero or god going into battle against a nonhuman creature, usually a dragon or snake-like demon, who poses a threat to the life and prosperity of the community, and defeating it to restore the proper order of things. We will see the *Rig Veda* version of this myth later in the chapter.

While archeological evidence for material arts among the Indo-Europeans is scanty, the verbal arts appear to have been a central cultural preoccupation. Poets or bards assumed the crucial social role of transmitting the cultural knowledge of the community. They celebrated the gods, tribal heroes, and their own leaders in oral verse. In a society where the elite highly valued "imperishable fame" (a phrase shared in Sanskrit and Greek), poets were the ones who could confer this glory by composing memorable verses of praise. This placed them in a reciprocal and mutually beneficial relation with the chieftains and warriors who acted as their primary patrons. Poets eulogized leaders for their feats in battle, and the successful warriors honored the poets with gifts and shares in the booty. It is thanks to this tradition of mutual back-scratching among Indo-European warriors and their bards that we know of the legendary heroes of the *Mahabharata* and the *Iliad*, epic compositions that did indeed bring imperishable fame to their protagonists.

Where did the original PIE speakers live? The most widely held view among current scholars locates these tribes in the vast grasslands north of the Black and Caspian seas, called the Pontic-Caspian Steppe. This large territory, some 200,000 square miles, spreads across the modern borders of eastern Ukraine, southern Russia, and Kazakhstan (**Map 6**). At a certain point, around the mid-fourth millennium BCE, some of these groups began to move out beyond this region, taking with them their version of the PIE language. No doubt their movements were facilitated by the new possibilities of horse-and-wheel technologies, with small nomadic tribal bands migrating with herds of cattle and other livestock. In some cases they were moving into sparsely populated regions, but in others the Indo-European speakers entered into more densely populated areas of settled agricultural economies, where the new immigrants found themselves decidedly in the minority. There would have been interaction between populations as well as trade, competition, periodic conflict, and bilingualism, leading oftentimes to the eventual adoption of the Indo-European language by significant segments of the population.



MAP 6. Migrations of the Indo-European Languages

Indo-Aryan Migrants in South Asia

Linguists have exercised considerable ingenuity retracing the migratory routes of Indo-European speaking groups. Our India-centric interest lies with the groups that moved south and east, and eventually into the Indian subcontinent. There is broad agreement that two subbranches of the Indo-European family tree, the Indic and Iranian, are so closely related to one another that they must originally have been a single branch. Speakers of this Indo-Iranian branch initially separated from the other branches of Indo-European at an early period, and subsequently the single branch forked into separate Indic and Iranian language groups. These linguistic developments correspond to an initial migration southward into Bactria and Afghanistan, and then separate migrations east into India and west into Iran.

Among other shared things, these groups referred to themselves as *arya*. Though we cannot be certain exactly what was originally indicated by the term, it is often translated as "noble." The name of the present-day nation of Iran derives from the ancient term arya. In early and medieval India, Aryavarta (or "homeland of the Aryans") became a geographical designation for northern and central India from the Arabian Sea to the Bay of Bengal. It must be said also that the term has a complex history of usage in modern European languages, often with racial signification, and one that has not been ennobling. It is important to emphasize that scholars do not use the term to designate a racial or ethnic population. In this book we will use the term Indo-Aryan simply to designate both the language-family and the culture that developed historically out of the entry of Indo-European speaking groups in northern India starting in the second millennium BCE.

The Iranian branch of Indo-Iranian is a source of ancient Avestan and Persian and of the modern languages of Persian, Pashto, and Kurdish, spoken by something like seventy million speakers in Iran, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and parts of adjacent countries. The earliest surviving text in a form of Old Iranian or Avestan is the *Gathas* of Zarathustra (variously dated to 1100–600 BCE), a portion of the larger *Avesta*. This is the foundational work of what later became the religion of Zoroastrianism, the dominant faith of the Iranian region up to the ninth century CE.[15] A few centuries later the Persian emperors Darius and Xerxes (in the sixth and fifth centuries BCE) had inscriptions carved in a form of Old Persian. The Persians formed the first great empire in world history, and we will return to them in chapter 5.

The groups that are most important for our story, however, are the Indo-Aryans, the bands of Indo-European speakers who migrated eastward through routes like the Bolan Pass that took them past Mehrgarh and into the Indus Valley area during the second millennium BCE. These small groups of nomadic pastoralists entered a populous region in which a formerly urbanized and centralized Indus Valley civilization had entered a post-urban phase. While the cities and towns of the earlier civilization had disintegrated, and the urban crafts and practice of writing likewise had disappeared, numerous smaller agricultural settlements still occupied the fertile areas of the Punjab. The geographical world known to the poets of the *Rig Veda* centers on the *Sapta-sindhu*, or “Land of Seven Rivers,” now known as the Punjab in northwestern India and Pakistan. It includes eastern Afghanistan and the Kabul valley to the west, and extends as far as the upper Ganges and Yamuna rivers in the east. Yet the geography is not a fixed one. The tribal nomads of the *Rig Veda* are on the move eastward. Movement through the Indus River basin was not easy, as the Indo-Aryan tribes were migrating within a well-populated region. The picture that emerges from the *Rig Veda* hymns is one of fiercely contested territories and battles over cows. For the pastoral Indo-Aryans, cows are the primary form of wealth, and land and water to maintain the herds are necessary for tribal survival and prosperity. With the aid of their warrior god Indra, the Indo-Aryan bands fight their way across the Punjab and gain the glory of their poets' praises.

The *Rig Veda* speaks of many conflicts with *dasas* or *dasyus*. Dasas do not recognize the Indo-Aryan gods and do not offer sacrifice. The Dasas generally appear as indigenous inhabitants of the land who are opponents of the Indo-Aryans, though the term also designates superhuman demons who oppose the gods. The antagonist attitude toward Dasas in the earliest Indo-Aryan poetry combined with the demise of the urban civilization of the Indus Valley in roughly the same period led some earlier historians to postulate cataclysmic battles in which Indo-Aryans destroy the great cities of Harappa and Mohenjodaro. But this hypothesis runs up against a lack of archeological evidence. Moreover, it seems to imply a greater unity to the Indo-Aryan community than was the case. It is clear from the *Rig Veda* that the Indo-Aryan tribes battled just as much against one another as they did against any Dasa indigenous groups.

Behind the agonistic rhetoric of battle, however, other forms of social interaction were surely occurring. The pastoral nomadic Indo-Aryan tribes and the more settled mixed agricultural communities of the post-urban Indus Valley region were developing a more complex web of interrelationships. This interaction appears at its most basic level in the language of the *Rig Veda* itself. In the earliest text composed in the language of the Indo-Aryans, Vedic Sanskrit, one can already find in it numerous words, using new phonemes, that can only have been borrowed from indigenous languages. In the *Rig Veda* hymns, the Indo-Aryans and those they label Dasas are not inexorably opposed to one another. Alliances may be made. Dasas may even appear as offerers of sacrifices to the Indo-Aryan gods.

These threads of textual evidence point to a broader fabric of social, political, and cultural relationships between newcomers and residents. With their herds of cattle and sheep, the pastoral Indo-Aryans produced goods they could trade with agricultural villagers, and the villagers with their crops and their crafts had products useful to the pastoralists. In such cases, anthropologists have observed, it is usually pastoralists who have a long-term advantage in exchange relations, and this often leads to the establishment of their dominance in local systems of stratification. Along with the social relations between groups comes bilingualism. This does not happen by osmosis, of course. Bilingualism arises when persons who speak one language find it necessary or advantageous to learn and speak another language to gain access to goods, status, security, power, or knowledge.

Such persons generally shift languages according to context: they may speak one language at home and another in the marketplace or at the sacrificial site. They become not just language mediators, but also culture brokers. In the dynamic of bilingualism, the usage of Vedic Sanskrit expanded, and the language itself changed. Sanskrit spread with the ability of Indo-Aryan Sanskrit speakers to offer advantages to others with whom they engaged in trade and other interactions. At the same time, those others brought new terms, and even new ways of making sounds, into the Sanskrit language.

What was emerging, then, was not a simple society of two distinct ethnic groupings. In the *Rig Veda* we can already see movement toward a more complex, synthetic society. In such a society, the cultural features of indigenous local communities would be mixed and integrated with the traditions of the minority Indo-Aryan groups who sought to establish themselves as elites in the new territories they occupied. On the other side, features of the new elites could be incorporated and integrated by locals. This mutuality is reflected in the archeological evidence—or rather, the lack of any clear evidence for distinctively Indo-Aryan material culture in South Asia during this period. Archeologist F. R. Allchin describes what emerges from this synthesis:

> [T]his complex culture involved a deeply rooted Indian, even Indus, element as its dominant feature; while its "Aryan" name derived from the recollection of a remembered, or imagined, ancestry by a tiny proportion of the population, from the language they had transmitted to an ever-growing number of the native population, and from the name by which the minority group referred to themselves, and were no doubt referred to by others eager to associate themselves with the dominant group.[16]

Integration of groups, synthesis of diverse cultural elements, hybridity, and hierarchical rankings: this is a social and cultural dynamic that one will see repeatedly through South Asian history. Anthropologists have described this complex process in terms of interactions between "Great" and "Little" traditions, and in terms of forces like "Sanskritization" and "brahminization." Others have rightly criticized such models for reifying traditions that are always in flux or for privileging certain types of cultural flows over others. Nevertheless, these formulations point toward cultural dynamics that we can see repeatedly at work in India from the earliest times.

This is the broader milieu in the Punjab and adjacent regions around 1300 BCE to 1000 BCE, when the *Rig Veda* was composed. In the *Rig Veda* we hear the voices of an elite stratum within an emerging complex society.

The Vision of the *Rig Veda* Poets

The *Rig Veda Samhita* is, as its name indicates, a compilation (*samhita*). The collection is made up of ten books or "cycles" (*mandala*). Books two through seven are known as "family books," since each of them belonged to a particular family or lineage that composed and passed down its poetic legacy over generations. Book eight consists of hymns from two other families, and book nine is a compilation of hymns to be used in the Soma ritual. Books one and ten are considered to be later additions to the compilation. At some point, probably around 1000 BCE, the family traditions were collected together and reorganized to form a single work.

The *Rig Veda* consists entirely of verse. Verses are composed in fixed metrical patterns, which distinguish them from everyday speech. These composers of the hymns are known as *rishis*, usually translated as "sages" or "seers." Although later Indian commentators would characterize the *Rig Veda* as *apaurusheya*, "not composed by humans," the hymns in the text are not always anonymous. The text includes the names of individual rishis and their families, such as Madhuchandas Vaishvamitra, who composed the opening hymn to Agni.

The Rhetoric of Vedic Hymns

The rishis address their hymns primarily to the gods. Most often a hymn will direct itself toward a single deity. A *Rig Veda* hymn is an act of communication between an addresser-worshipper and the addressee-deity.[17] In some ways it is a one-sided communication, for the god rarely makes a verbal reply. The communication, however, is overheard by other humans. The most successful of these would be remembered and transmitted, first within the families of poets, and then in the compilation of the *Rig Veda* itself. Since these hymns have been remembered and passed down, modern Hindu followers of the Vedas can repeat the communication daily, and we are able to hear these same verses ourselves three thousand years later.

The Gayatri verse—the first verse imparted to a student newly initiated into the Veda—speaks to the god Savitar, the rising and setting sun, as the one who stimulates and inspires life and thought.

> May we make our own that desirable effulgence of the god Savitar,
> Who will rouse forth our insights.
> (RV 3.62.10, trans. Jamison & Brereton: 554)

This simple verse illustrates two of the most basic rhetorical features of the *Rig Veda* hymns. The poet praises a god for his extraordinary qualities and then requests assistance or benefits from the god. Hymns are human messages to the gods that are both panegyric and petition. They embody the hope that the god will hear the communication, take pleasure in it, and respond in a beneficial manner.

For a fuller sense of the rhetoric of *Rig Veda* poetics, let us look at one complete hymn, directed to the god Indra. The poet Gritsamada begins by announcing his intention to present a song of praise to Indra, addressing the god directly.

> To the best of you that are I offer a goodly song of praise, like an oblation in the kindled fire. For protection we call upon Indra, who is not liable to decay, the causer of decay, strengthened, from of old a youth.
>
> (RV 2.16, trans. Maurer 1986: 63–64)

Significantly, he compares this song-offering to the offering of an oblation into a sacrificial fire, and he suggests that his praise will increase Indra's strength just as ghee rouses up the flames of a fire. The hymns collected in the *Rig Veda* do in fact form a crucial part of Vedic sacrificial ceremonies, just as much as the material oblations. Poems are not just composed about sacrifice, but also recited within it.

The poet goes on to praise Indra as the embodiment of all heroic powers. The poet alludes to various characteristics of Indra's divine personality: his swift horses and chariot, his thunderbolt, his taste for the Soma drink.

> Without this mighty Indra there isn't anything at all: in him are combined all heroic powers. In his belly he bears the Soma, in his body strength and might, in his hand the thunderbolt, in his head wisdom.
>
> Not by heaven and earth can your power—Indra's power!—be encompassed, nor by the seas and the mountains your chariot, nor can anyone come near your thunderbolt—when with your swift horses you fly many a mile.

The hymns of the *Rig Veda* are more often allusive than narrative, for they speak to an audience of gods and humans who already know the stories of Indra's thunderbolt and his exploits under the influence of Soma. Indra is the "bull," symbol of masculine virile strength. The poet then returns to the sacrificial context in which the hymn is sung.

> Since all lay before him their intent to worship—him who is worthy of worship, dauntless, the bull—and adhere to him, do you, Agni, as a bull worship

> him on our behalf with an oblation, you who are the most knowledgeable!— Drink the Soma, Indra, along with the bull, the radiant flame!
>
> The trough of the bull, the wave of honey, flows clear for the bull to drink, whose nourishment is the bull. The two adhvaryus are bulls, the pressing-stones are bulls: they press the bull Soma for the bull.
>
> A bull is your thunderbolt, and a bull your chariot. Bulls are your two bay horses, bulls your weapons. Of the bull, the exhilarating drink, O bull, *you* are the lord. O Indra, have your fill of Soma the bull!

The poet requests Agni, the god who is also the sacrificial fire, to convey offerings to Indra, and he urges Indra to drink the Soma, the powerful god who is also the exhilarating sacrificial beverage that worshippers offer to him. Both Agni and Soma are also bulls in their potency. Yet to maintain their powers, the gods depend on the material offerings and praises of human worshippers.

In verse seven, the poet brings in another dimension of the hymn's context. He is sending his song forth, he says, in a contest.

> Forth to you, like a ship, I launch an eloquent song in the contest. With a prayer I approach you at the pressings, bold as I am. I hope he will listen to this word of ours! We will draw upon Indra, as a reservoir of wealth.

Poetic composition was a competitive art for the Vedic rishis. It was not enough to praise and petition the gods in verse; it had to be done skillfully. The poets compare the work of composition to that of chariot-makers as they carefully assemble wooden parts into a well-formed whole, and to that of weavers who turn thread into cloth. These poet-craftsmen were called to exhibit their skill in verbal contests that accompanied ritual ceremonies, along with other competitions including chariot races, military tournaments, and gambling matches.[18]

In the final two verses of the Indra hymn, the poet concludes with his request.

> Before we are stricken, come hither unto us, as a cow swollen with fodder unto her calf! Straightway with your good will, O you of a hundredfold powers, may we be firmly united, as husbands with their wives!
>
> Now may that bountiful gift-cow of yours yield milk to the singer according to his desire, O Indra! Be kind to your praisers: let not fortune pass us by! Loudly would we speak at the assembly, having goodly heroes!

He asks to be united with Indra, like a calf with its mother or like a husband and wife. He wishes to partake of the "milk" that Indra milks out from that most bountiful milch cow, the earth itself. Now that Indra has received offerings of praise along with draughts of Soma and other offerings, Gritsamada hopes that the god will reciprocate generously.

This hymn to Indra, after its composition and performance in a poetry contest and Soma sacrifice, became part of the collection of the Gritsamadas lineage of poets. At a still later time, the Gritsamadas collection of hymns was compiled together with other family collections and reorganized, as part of the *Rig Veda Samhita*. As part of this great compilation, this poet's hymn could be remembered and recited in new Soma sacrifices for centuries to come.

Collectively the hymns convey "knowledge" or "truth." The term *veda*, from the Sanskrit root *vid*, to know, comes from the Indo-European root **weid*, which also appears in European languages like the German "Wissen" and in English words "wit" and "wisdom." The *Rig Veda* offers a shared vision of knowledge concerning the true order of things and the best way to achieve the good life within that order, as seen and articulated by a group of elite Indo-Aryan poets. They do not create that truth; they perceive and articulate it. That knowledge is not easily available to all. The knowledge that matters most in the *Rig Veda* world of values is normally hidden from human perception. However, the rishis are able to perceive it, through the special capacity of *dhi* ("vision" or "insight"). This is an exceptional faculty that seers possess: to see in their minds things as they really are. It is not solely an exceptional human capacity, however. The poets also portray this insight as a form of inspiration that can be granted to them by the gods. They repeatedly ask the gods for insight and are grateful when the gods comply. The special task of poets, as both inspired visionaries and craftsmen, is to transform this vision into a compelling verbal form, just as a chariot-maker turns raw materials into a fine vehicle. In its verbal form as a hymn, the vision may then be offered back to the god who has granted the inspiration in the first place. For their part, gods take pleasure in well-crafted and truthful poetic expressions. They are connoisseurs of well-spoken hymns.

When a poet successfully embodies insight in a hymn, it may be characterized as *brahman*. In its earliest usage, this term, which derives from a verb root meaning "to expand or swell," denotes sacred speech and its power or efficacy. (We will meet later with many further meanings to this term and its derivatives.) "A *brahman* was expansive in two ways," writes William Mahoney. "First, it gave voice to the mysterious force that holds the universe together. Second, it was an effective utterance; its mysterious, magical power extended into the world, carrying with it the power of transformation."[19] The Word can embody truth, and through that truth it can be powerful. In the famous *Rig Veda* phrase that was much later adopted as the national motto of the Indian nation-state, “Truth is indeed victorious” (*satyam eva jayate)*.

Order, Disorder, and Sacrifice

In the *Rig Veda*, that mysterious force that holds the cosmos together is sometimes referred to as *rita*. This term has been translated with various English words (law, rule, divine truth, etc.), but it may best be defined as “the cycle that orders both the universe and society.”[20] The workings of rita may be observed in the natural cycles of sun and moon, seasons, growth and decay. So the cycle of day and night, with its regular oscillation of light and dark and the steady progression of sun from rising to falling, exemplifies activity according to rita. The regular annual shifts in the sun’s course, related to the alternation of hot and cool seasons, the regular arrival of rains, and the growth of crops, show the operations of rita. Humans are also called upon to organize activities in harmony with these cycles. These include not just practical ways humans coordinate their lives with natural cycles, like working during the day and sleeping at night, or planting seeds at the proper time of year to enable their growth. In the *Rig Veda* humans also offer regular sacrificial rituals at important moments of transition in the natural cycles to help maintain the orderly progression of things. Sacrifice also helps sustain proper and harmonious relations between the two most important categories of beings in the world of the *Rig Veda*, gods and humans.

The deities of the *Rig Veda* are known collectively as *devas*, “sky-beings,” from the Sanskrit (and Indo-European) word for the shining daytime sky. Cognate terms in English include “divine” and “deity.” Humans are earth dwellers. Gods are immortal (*amritya*) while humans are bound to die (*martya*, from the same Indo-European root as English “mortal”). There is a difference in powers between the two groups, and humans must address the gods with suitable respect and honor.

> Not one of you, gods, is small, not one a little child; all of you are truly great.
>
> Therefore you are worthy of praise and of sacrifice, you thirty-three gods of Manu, arrogant and powerful.
>
> Protect us, help us and speak for us; do not lead us into the distance far away from the path of our father Manu.
>
> You gods who are all here and who belong to all men, give far-reaching shelter to us and to our cows and horses.
>
> (RV 8.30, trans. O’Flaherty 1981: 22)

The gods are "all here"—they are present within the world and intervene to make their presence known. Because the gods are great in their powers, they can give far-reaching shelter to humans and their livestock if they choose. However, the hymns of the *Rig Veda* do not portray this as a one-way relationship between all-powerful gods and helpless mortals. Rather, gods also depend on humans. In the ritual of sacrifice, humans and gods engage in a mutual exchange, to the benefit of both. In Vedic theism, this reciprocity is the basis of a flourishing human society.

As the most important human social practice, sacrifice is structured as a shared meal, an act of hospitality that humans offer to the gods as their honored guests. It does not require permanent structures for worship, or icons or images, or even any special paraphernalia beyond household implements. In that sense, Vedic sacrifice is an "ideally portable religion," as Stephanie Jamison puts it, suitable for a community of pastoralists.[21] Those who offer a sacrifice first prepare a grass-strewn seat for the gods and then invite them to come sit on it. The gods do attend, but most of them remain invisible. The sacrificers entertain their divine guests with praises and songs, namely the hymns of the *Rig Veda*. They offer the gods food. Food offerings may consist of simple oblations of dairy products like ghee and milk, cakes of grain, and animal offerings such as goats. In the most elaborate sacrifices they offer the intoxicating preparation Soma. Fire plays a key role in sacrifice. Known as the god Agni, the fire receives the sacrificial offerings and transmits them to the other gods. When they have satisfied the gods with food and drink, the sacrificers sing their praises once again and dismiss them. As we have seen, the sacrifice has an ulterior motive beyond the enjoyment of a good meal together. One treats the gods well to make them well disposed and to receive from them protection from misfortune, prosperity in the form of livestock, victory over adversaries, and a multitude of other worldly benefits.

Although they do not provide elaborate procedures for the ritual (as subsequent Vedic texts would), the poets of the *Rig Veda* celebrate sacrifice as crucial to the order of things. They compare the actions of sacrifice to other productive activities, such as weaving and agriculture. "Hitch up the plows; stretch the yokes across; in a prepared womb strew the seed here," one poet advises sacrificers, and, if done well, "the ripe grain should come even closer to our sickles."[22] For the bards, sacrifice operates in a broader sphere than these other mundane labors. Sacrifice weaves together the fabric of relations involving gods and humans, and it thereby makes the world fruitful for all those who participate in its cycle of exchanges.

There are also beings who remain outside the harmonious circle of gods and humans. The most common general terms for these Others are Dasas and Dasyus, although other names also refer to groups of outsiders, such as the Panis and the Danavas. As we have seen, the Dasas broadly correspond in the *Rig Veda* with indigenous non-Aryan populations. By and large Dasas do not worship the Indo-Aryan gods and they do not participate in sacrifice. But more than simply an ethnic category, these Others fit into a broader cosmic dichotomy, in which forces of light and expansive life are pitted against forces of darkness and contraction. Dasas also can appear as superhuman demons, such as the dragon-like Vritra. If the gods and humans engage in reciprocally beneficial relations that maintain the harmonious course of rita, the indigenous and demonic Dasas seek to constrain the natural cycles and overturn order. They may pen up free-roaming cows, dam up the flowing waters, or try to hide Soma in caves. These are acts of *nir-rita*, disorder. Therefore, relations between the gods and humans on the one hand, and Dasas on the other, are frequently antagonistic. The *Rig Veda* poets call on the gods to defeat the demons and to lead their human followers in battles against the Dasas.

Gods and Goddesses of the Rig Veda

The poets of the *Rig Veda* honor a great number of deities. Later tradition would speak of "the thirty-three" principal Vedic gods, but the text names many more than this. All are "truly great," as the poet has it. Earlier Western scholarship often regarded these gods as deified natural forces and classified the religion of the *Rig Veda* within an evolutionary sequence as a primitive form of "nature worship." While a few deities of the *Rig Veda* do correspond broadly to natural phenomena, such as the sun god Surya, wind god Vayu, and Prithivi the goddess Earth, the most important gods have much fuller personalities, more elaborate stories, and more complex natures than simple nature worship would allow.

The poets do not envision an organized pantheon of gods, with a clear and consistent chain of command. In different contexts, they may honor this or that god as highest one. Nineteenth-century Indologist Max Müller classified this aspect of the *Rig Veda* as "henotheism," distinct from both polytheism and monotheism. To the worshippers, every god is a real divinity. When worshipping a particular god, however, one should praise that deity as the highest and best of them all. But this does not exclude the recognition of other gods. Nevertheless, certain gods emerge throughout the text as the most frequent recipients of the bards' attentions. The clear winner in this contest is Indra, the warrior and chieftain, celebrated in over 250 hymns out of the 1,028 in the *Rig Veda*. The two others most frequently addressed are Agni the fire god and Soma the invigorating plant and deified beverage.

Indra is the divine prototype of the strong and successful warrior, leading his band of gods against all enemies. He is the most anthropomorphic of the Vedic gods: a powerful tawny-colored male being with hands and arms, mouth and belly. His most famous victory comes against a dragon-like demon known as Vritra, the "restrainer." Vritra has dammed up the flowing waters with a mountain. Invigorating himself with sacrificial Soma and arming himself with his thunderbolt weapon, Indra attacks the demon.

> Let me now sing the heroic deeds of Indra, the first that the thunderbolt-wielder performed. He killed the dragon and pierced an opening for the waters; he split open the bellies of mountains.
>
> He killed the dragon who lay upon the mountain; Tvashtri fashioned the roaring thunderbolt for him. Like lowing cows, the flowing waters rushed straight down to the sea.
>
> Wildly excited like a bull, he took the Soma for himself and drank the extract from the three bowls in the three-day Soma ceremony. Indra the Generous seized his thunderbolt to hurl it as a weapon; he killed the first-born of dragons.
>
> Indra, when you killed the first-born of dragons and overcame by your own magic the magic of the magicians, at that very moment you brought forth the sun, the sky, and dawn. Since then you have found no enemy to conquer you.
>
> (RV 1.32.1-4, trans. O'Flaherty 1981: 149)

The poet Hiranyastupa envisions Indra's great victory as a veritable act of creation. Not only do the waters resume their proper flow, but by his actions Indra also brings forth the sun, sky, and dawn. In other battles, Indra frees cows that have been imprisoned in a cave by the Panis, and he prevents other demons from climbing up into the sky. Over and over, Indra drinks Soma to invigorate himself, grabs his thunderbolt, leads his posse of gods to victory, and then generously distributes the fruits of battle among those who have followed him.

While the *Rig Veda* poets laud Indra's great exploits, they also allude to other sides of his story that speak of a troubled family life full of Oedipus-like conflict. To his mother's consternation, Indra as a fetus refuses to journey through the birth canal and insists instead on emerging through her side. After his birth she hides him, evidently to protect Indra from his father. Then she abandons him. Indra goes on to kill his father, for reasons never made entirely clear. Later, Indra also has an altercation with his own son. The son tries to usurp Indra's position by offering a sacrifice to which he invites all the gods except Indra. Not ready to pass on leadership yet, Indra shows up uninvited at the sacrifice and puts his son back in his place with a series of riddles and boasts.

If Indra is the exemplary chieftain, the god Agni appears as the model priest. The Sanskrit word *agni* means "fire," and it shares an Indo-European root with Latin *ignis* (also fire) from which we get the English word "ignite." As fire, Agni takes on multiple forms; the poets speak of Agni as the household hearth fire, the sacrificial fire, the fire of cremation, forest fire, the sun, the digestive fire in the belly, the fire of poetic inspiration, and the mysterious fire that burns in the midst of the waters. His bright flickering tongues, say the poets, lap up the sacrificial ghee and leap up in delight.

Like fire itself, Agni can be frightening when out of control. Some hymns invoke a raging Agni against enemies. In the *Rig Veda*, Agni's primary role lies within the more controlled setting of sacrifice. Unlike other gods, Agni is visibly present in the form of the sacrificial fire. He acts as intermediary between humans and gods, escorting the gods to the sacrifice and then conveying the offerings to them. As priest among the gods, Agni is most closely identified with the sacrifice. This is hard and unrelenting labor for a god, and in some hymns we learn of Agni's ambivalence. At one point he flees from his role and hides in the waters. Without Agni, the sacrifice cannot go forward and the livelihood of the gods is threatened. The gods mount a search party and coax Agni back to his crucial job. The world needs Agni to maintain its harmony. Appropriately the compilers of the *Rig Veda Samhita* placed a hymn extolling Agni's key role in the sacrifice as first poem in the entire collection.

Like Agni, Soma has multiple forms. He is a plant, a liquid beverage made from the plant, and a god who personifies the power of the drink. The *Rig Veda* poets love to describe the process of preparing the Soma drink. The plant must be procured, soaked in water, and pressed with stones in wooden bowls. The Soma bellows in the wood like a newborn calf. The extract is then strained through a wool filter and mixed with milk, ghee, or other liquids. Soma gushes through the filter, say the poets, like a thousand rushing streams or like a shower of rain. But even more, the poets love to describe the wondrous effects of drinking this brew. As we have seen, Indra delights in imbibing Soma before and after battles. The humans who provide Soma to Indra as sacrificial offerings also partake in it, and Soma is equally potent for them. To the bards Soma grants poetic inspiration. In this sense, Soma is called the "navel of rita," for he reveals the truth, the fabric of connections not usually evident. Drinking Soma also brings a sense of expansiveness, invincibility, and power. As one inspired poet proclaims,

> In my vastness, I surpassed the sky and this vast earth. Have I not drunk Soma?
> Yes! I will place the earth here, or perhaps there. Have I not drunk Soma?
> I will thrash the earth soundly, here, or perhaps there. Have I not drunk Soma?
> One of my wings is in the sky; I have trailed the other below. Have I not drunk Soma?
> I am huge, huge! flying to the cloud. Have I not drunk Soma?
> (RV 10. 119.8-12, trans. O'Flaherty 1981: 131–32)

The poets recognize the dangers in this powerful beverage and pray that Soma not overwhelm them.

> Be kind and merciful to us, Soma; be good to our heart, without confusing our powers in your whirlwind.
> King Soma, do not enrage us; do not terrify us; do not wound our heart with dazzling light.
> (RV 8.79.7-8, trans. O'Flaherty 1981: 121)

What is this extraordinary plant that can have such potent and exhilarating effects? Where can we find it? Soma also appears in the early Iranian texts and rites as *haoma*, suggesting that it was a shared Indo-Iranian cultural possession. Since the time of William Jones, Indologists, ethnologists, botanists, pharmacologists, mycologists, and even novelists have all joined in a quest to solve this alluring mystery. International conferences have been devoted to the identity of Soma. Still there is no broadly accepted answer.

The *Rig Veda* poets provide one account of the origin of Soma. Originally it grew only in heaven, they aver, until a high-flying eagle or falcon was sent to fetch some and bring it back to earth, where it took root high on Mount Mujavat. This narrative has not satisfied Western scholars, and they have proposed all sorts of earthly hypotheses. Was it beer, wine, mead, cannabis, rhubarb (for its reddish juice), Syrian rue, a hallucinogenic mushroom, or something else? One longstanding hypothesis, probably the most commonly held view among current scholars, identifies Soma with Ephedra. This is a shrubby plant growing in dry, cool areas of Central Asia and other temperate regions, which nowadays is the source of the medication ephedrine that is used to treat asthma and allergies. It is also a potent stimulant, akin in its effects to synthetic amphetamines. The question is still open. Whatever it was, Soma had profound effects on the bards of the *Rig Veda* in a ritual setting, and on their gods as well. And by the time of the later Vedas, it was no longer readily available.[23]

Other male deities celebrated in the hymns of the *Rig Veda* are groups like the Adityas and the Maruts. Two gods who become dominant in later Indic religious traditions—Vishnu and Rudra-Shiva—also receive praise, but they are decidedly secondary deities in the *Rig Veda* divine order. Vishnu is a wide-ranging god who accompanies Indra in some of his capers, while Rudra appears most often as a fierce and dangerous outsider deity who must be propitiated to avoid his wrath.

Male gods dominate the pantheon in the *Rig Veda*, but female divinities are not entirely absent. There are Aditi (the "boundless one" and mother of the Adityas); Shri (the "lustrous"); and Prithivi, the goddess Earth. The Waters as givers of life figure as a divine female, and rivers like the Sarasvati are regularly personified as goddesses. The goddess most often praised in the *Rig Veda*, with some twenty-one hymns directed to her, is the bountiful Ushas, or Dawn, the beautiful young woman who takes the Sun as her lover. Poets celebrate Ushas with personifying similes: she is like a dancing girl putting on ornaments and showing her breast, or like a lover whose alluring face awakens others to happiness. Ushas is just as able as any male deity to shower her prizes on those who properly praise her.

> Dawn, you hold the victory prize, bring us that brightly coloured power
> by which we establish children and grandchildren.
> Dawn, rich in cows, rich in horses, resplendent giver of gifts, shine your
> riches upon us here and now.
> Harness your red-gold horses now, O prize-giving Dawn, and bring all
> good fortunes to us.
> (RV 1.92.13-15, trans. O'Flaherty 1981: 180)

Considering the importance of the sacred Word for the *Rig Veda* poets, it is worth looking at their celebration of another divine female, the goddess Speech (*vach*). In one late hymn, Speech herself speaks, to proclaim her own greatness, surpassing all other deities. She begins by boldly claiming that she is the power that carries the better-known male deities.

> I move with the Rudras, with the Vasus, with the Adityas and all the gods. I carry both Mitra and Varuna, both Indra and Agni, and both of the Ashvins.
>
> I carry the swelling Soma and Tvashtri, and Pushan and Bhaga. I bestow wealth on the pious sacrificer who presses the Soma and offers the oblation.

Speech properly points to her role in sacrifice. No less than Agni, Speech is a necessary element for all sacrificial rites. This makes her also a worthy recipient of sacrificial offerings.

> I am the queen, the confluence of riches, the skillful one who is first among those worthy of sacrifice. The gods divided me up into various parts, for I dwell in many places and enter into many forms.
>
> The one who eats food, who truly sees, who breathes, who hears what is said, does so through me. Though they do not realize it, they dwell in me. Listen, you whom they have heard: what I tell you should be heeded.

Speech can be heard in many forms, not just human speech but also the whisper of the breeze and the thunder of storm clouds. It is through her power, she claims, that the great become great, and warriors are able to defeat their foes. Through her, she reminds the poet, poets are heard.

> I am the one who says, by myself, what gives joy to gods and men.
> Whom I love I make awesome; I make him a sage, a wise man, a Brahmin.
> I stretch the bow for Rudra so that his arrow will strike down the hater of prayer. I incite the contest among the people. I have pervaded sky and earth.

This leads her to still more far-reaching claims. She is responsible for creation and continues to pervade the cosmos.

> I gave birth to the father on the head of this world. My womb is in the waters, within the ocean. From there I spread out over all creatures and touch the very sky with the crown of my head.
> I am the one who blows like the wind, embracing all creatures. Beyond the sky, beyond this earth, so much have I become in my greatness.
> (RV 10.125, trans. O'Flaherty 1981: 63)

For the poets of the *Rig Veda*, the spoken or sung Word has tremendous creative power, and this power to move the world is embodied in the goddess Speech. For now, let us give her the final word.

Indo-Aryan Society and Changing Times

Generally speaking the poets of the *Rig Veda* were more concerned with theology than sociology. Nevertheless, they do offer a partial view of the social order within which they sang their praises of the gods.

The human community of Indo-Aryans reflected in the *Rig Veda* is relatively simple in its social organization. One sees none of the complex division of labor or structures of authority necessary to an urban culture such as the earlier Indus Valley civilization in the same area. Rather, the poets portray their society as grounded in extended family units (*kula*) and larger clan (*grama*, *vish*) or tribal (*jana*) groupings. The clan units were mobile. While the word "grama" would later denote a fixed "village," in the *Rig Veda* it indicates a group of people who travel together, a camp or a clan. Likewise, the term *janapada*, which would designate in later times a fixed geographical "territory," refers in the *Rig Veda* simply to the place where the group (*jana*) places its collective foot (*pada*), the temporary location of a nomadic tribe. The *janas*, as far as we can tell, were flexible social units under the leadership of a chieftain.

As Indra led the gods, the first duty of a human chieftain was to lead his tribe in its military exploits. Their battles were for access to or control over resources: cattle raids, battles to gain pastureland or river waters for the livestock. The chieftain was responsible for the protection and prosperity of the tribe, and he was expected to distribute the booty from successful raids generously among his followers, just as Indra did among the gods. In later Vedic times the *rajan* would become subject to a more complex ritual investiture of "kingship." We will return to the emergence of kingship in Indo-Aryan society in the next chapter.

The other significant social category in the *Rig Veda* is the poet-priest. He is the "seer" (rishi) who composes visionary hymns and sings them at ritual events. He is also the officiant at collective sacrificial rites. Like Agni among the gods, he acts as a mediator between the gods and other humans. As possessor of the ritually efficacious word or *brahman* (neuter), this figure is also called *brahman*, a masculine noun for the one associated with the *brahman*. In later Vedic times, we will see, the term *brahman* (masc.) comes to designate both a particular type of sacrificial priest and a broader social class, the Brahmin, but within the *Rig Veda* the use of the term remains more focused on the rishi's relation with the sacred word.

Within the human world of the *Rig Veda*, these two groups—warrior-chieftains and poet-priests—make up a mutually dependent elite, at least as the rishis envision it. The poets praise the chieftains, along with the gods, and through the efficacy of their hymns and sacrifices they help assure the victories of the leaders and the prosperity of the tribe. A chieftain might appoint the services of a special personal priest, a *purohita* (literally, "one who goes before"), to perform ceremonies before battle. The purohita praises and invokes blessings on the armor and weapons, as well as on the chieftain. In turn, the leaders are exhorted to be generous as patrons of the poet-priests. Generosity is a cardinal virtue in the *Rig Veda* world of values, and those with the means ought to give to the gods through sacrifice and to the poets and priests who perform the sacrifice. In one unusually personal hymn, an elderly sage recalls the generosity of his former patron, Kurushravana, and implicitly criticizes the chieftain's son Upamashravas for failing to be equally beneficent.

> As a sage I chose my king Kurushravana the descendant of Trasadasyu,
> most generous to those who offer prayer,
> Whose three bays carry me in this chariot toward better times. I will
> praise him who gave a thousand cows to the priests,
> Upamashrava's father, whose words were as sweet as a field, is a delight
> to the one who lives on it.
> Upamashravas, his son, and grandson of Mitratithi—remember I am
> the one who sang the praises of your father.
> If I had power over the immortals or over mortals, my generous patron
> would be alive.
> No one lives beyond the decree of the gods, not even if he has a
> hundred souls. So I am parted from my companion.
> (RV 10.33. 4–9, trans. O'Flaherty 1981: 65)

One may see in the *Rig Veda* the beginning of stratification within a tribal society, based on a division of labor. The chieftains and warriors exercise a military function both defensively and aggressively to protect and aggrandize the tribe. The poet-priests are the representatives of the magico-religious order. This leaves the important function of assuring fertility and sustenance for the community to all other members of the group. It is important, however, not to reify these social functions into fixed and timeless categories. In the world of the *Rig Veda*, Indo-Aryan society is not envisioned in terms of an articulated system of social rankings or classes. That will emerge in the later Vedic period, as we see in the next chapter.

The collective vision of the *Rig Veda* poets provides us with an extraordinary view into an early Indic world that is changing. The pastoral migrant tribes of Indo-Aryan speakers have moved into the subcontinent from areas farther north and west, and they have come into contact with the sedentary village agriculturalists already settled in the Indus River area of the Punjab. There is conflict among the various communities, certainly, but also new exchanges and borrowings, both material and cultural, heading toward a more complex mixed society.

While the *Rig Veda* hymns for the most part observe a dichotomy of Aryan and Dasa communities, the new social order would soon pose new questions for

Vedic social theorists. How would they make a place for these indigenous groups that chose to affiliate themselves with Aryan tribes or practices? How would they articulate a more complicated social division of labor within a more settled economy? How would they deal with those who continued to remain apart? In the process, the terms arya and dasa would shift meanings, and new social categories would come to the fore. Even gods would shift their roles. We return to questions of this sort in the next chapter and throughout the book.

3

The World of Sacrifice (1000–600 BCE)

AT THE BEGINNING OF THINGS, proclaims one late hymn in the *Rig Veda Samhita*, there is just one singular being, whom the poem calls Purusha ("Male"). This being encompasses all that there is.

> Thousand-headed is Purusha, thousand-eyed, thousand-footed.
> He covered the earth on all sides and stood above it the space of ten fingers.
> Purusha alone is all this, what has been and what is to be, and he is the lord of the immortals, who grow further by means of food.
> Such is his greatness, and greater than this is Purusha: a quarter of him is all beings, three-quarters of him the immortal in heaven.
> Three-quarters of Purusha went upward, but a quarter of him was here below. From that he spread out in all directions into what eats and does not eat.
> From that Viraj was born: from Viraj, Purusha. When he was born, he extended beyond the earth, behind and also in front.
> (RV 10.90, trans. Maurer 1986)

Purusha is masculine and Viraj ("brilliant") is feminine; the poet suggests that these two forces, in some mysterious way, generate one another.

The primordial being Purusha, the hymn continues, is also the primordial sacrifice.

> When with Purusha as oblation the gods offered a sacrifice, the spring was its clarified butter, the summer the fuel, the autumn the oblation.

> A sacrifice on the sacred grass they sprinkled him, Purusha, who was born in the beginning. With him the gods sacrificed, the Sadhyas and the seers.

The elements that make up the world arise from that sacrifice.

> From that sacrifice, a total offering, was brought together the clotted butter: it made the beasts: those of the air, of the forest, and of the village.
> From that sacrifice, a total offering, the Hymns of Praise and the Chants were born; the metres were born from it; the Sacrificial Formula from it was born.
> From it the horses were born and whatsoever have incisor teeth in both jaws. The cows were born from it. From it were born the goats and sheep.

And in this original sacrifice, according to the hymn, four classes within human society come out of different portions of Purusha's body.

> When they portioned out Purusha, in how many ways did they distribute him? What is his mouth called, what his arms, what his thighs, what are his feet called?
> His mouth was the Brahmin, his arms were made the Rajanya, what was his thighs was made the Vaishya, from his feet the Shudra was born.

So, too, arise the gods and the three worlds—earth, atmosphere, and heaven.

> The moon from his mind was born; from his eye the sun was born; from his mouth both Indra and Agni; from his breath the wind was born.
> From his navel was the atmosphere; from his head the heaven evolved; from his feet the earth; the directions from his ear. Thus they fashioned the worlds.

In this original sacrifice, Purusha is both the sacrificial victim and the sacrifice itself.

> Seven were his altar-sticks; thrice seven faggots were made, when the gods, offering the sacrifice, tied Purusha as their victim.
> The gods sacrificed with the sacrifice to the sacrifice. These were the first rites. These powers reached the firmament, where the ancient Sadhyas are and also the gods.

The poet suggests that these “first rites” offered by the gods establish a path leading to the vault of heaven that humans should also follow.

This hymn, known as the Purushasukta, is included in the final book of the *Rig Veda*. It responds to questions raised within the early Vedic worldview and provides compelling new answers. Higher than the pantheon of Rig Vedic deities, this hymn envisions a single primordial being. It elevates the ritual act of sacrifice into a cosmogonic action. Not just a hospitable get-together of humans and gods, sacrifice becomes the source of the world as we know it. The Vedas themselves—the hymns, chants, meters, and sacrificial formula—all come directly out of this original sacrifice. Four classes of humans emerge from Purusha’s body during sacrifice, with the Brahmins said to come from the mouth. Finally, the first sacrifice is also a paradigm. As it offered the gods and Sadhyas (“accomplished beings”) the means to reach heaven, so, too, humans can emulate their attainment by also offering sacrifice. Since Purusha is identifiable as the sacrifice, humans will be reenacting the primordial action through their own ritual offerings.

This origin story for the cosmos, sung near the end of the earliest Veda, offers a kind of prolegomenon for the great religious project carried out over the next several centuries. In the Middle Vedic period of 1000–600 BCE, Brahmins establish themselves as a class of religious specialists. They collect, compile, and expand the existing Vedic traditions into an immense canon of oral scripture. They develop new methods of transmitting and interpreting the holy texts. Working with the class of chieftains and rulers, the Brahmins expand the range and complexity of sacrificial practices. They develop elaborate new royal rituals that confer ruling authority on ambitious kings. And they come to understand their sacrificial actions as crucial to maintaining the order of the cosmos. During the Middle Vedic period in northern India, we see the construction of a religious world centered on sacrifice.

The Middle Vedic Period

Archeologists call the period from 1000 BCE to 600 BCE in South Asia the “Early Iron Age,” pointing to the most significant new material technology of the period. Iron was introduced into northern India during this time, probably from earlier innovations in the southern part of the subcontinent. Historians label the same period the “Early Historic” period, since there are texts from this period that provide detailed historical evidence. Linguists use the term “Middle Vedic period.” If the form of Indo-Aryan language used in the earlier *Rig Veda* hymns was “Early Vedic,” then “Middle Vedic” designates the changing language in the subsequent Vedic works of this time. Middle Vedic is also an apt term for religious history, since the new works produced during this period took shape within the larger Vedic corpus. And what we know of the religions of India from this time comes almost entirely from the Vedas.

During the Middle Vedic period, Indo-Aryan-speaking peoples gradually migrated eastward, from the Indus River into the Yamuna-Ganges region.[1] This area was already inhabited. Agricultural settlements, as well as more itinerant hunter-gatherer and fishing tribes, occupied the Ganges River plains. Indo-Aryan speakers by and large acculturated themselves into this human landscape through means such as trade, bilingualism, and intermarriage. Over time, Indo-Aryan speakers came to form a social elite. The term "Aryan" came to designate not a distinct ethnic or racial community, but a cultural commitment: those "noble" people who shared in the language, the social order, and the premises set out in the Vedas. The old term "Dasa," formerly used for indigenous groups, was later to refer to those in servitude, "slaves," though not on an ethnic basis.

Archeologists observe an increasing number of settlements in northern India during this period but few advances in material culture. The patterns of agriculture in the region were already established. The rich alluvial soil and the warm climate allowed two crops per year, with rice becoming the preferred wet-season crop. Among domesticated animals, cattle, sheep, goats, pigs, and dogs were long established in northern India; only the horse was a new introduction. In their excavations, archeologists have found very little in the way of luxury goods or artistic products in the settlements of this period. Evidently the elites of this peasant economy directed their attention toward other matters.

More far-reaching changes occurred in political organization. Gradually the old Indo-Aryan tribes consolidated themselves into larger groupings and confederations. From the fifty tribes mentioned in the *Rig Veda*, far fewer are named in later Vedic works. Tribal leaders began to see themselves not simply as chieftains leading their clans, but as kings presiding over territories. The same Sanskrit word *rajan* follows this shift from an earlier meaning of "chieftain" to "king." The term *janapada*, formerly indicating the area occupied by a migrating tribal group, began to take on the meaning of a fixed territory. Increasingly, leadership was tied less to tribe and more to land. Historian Romila Thapar calls the transformation taking place over the course of this period an evolution "from lineage to state."[2]

The beginnings of this transition and its religious ramifications can be seen most clearly in the rise of the Kuru tribe. The origin of the Kurus is not clear, but sometime around 1000 BCE this group established itself in the area of

Kurukshetra, the “field” or territory of the Kurus, in the flat plains between the Indus and the Yamuna-Ganges river systems. (This area later figures as the great battlefield in the epic *Mahabharata*.) The Kurus brought other tribes under their sway or into alliance. Their most important alliance was with the Panchalas, who were settled along the upper Ganges farther to the east. As Indologist Michael Witzel argues, the Kurus established the first large polity or “early state” in South Asia. To reinforce their rule, the Kurus and their religious advisers undertook a major consolidation of the Vedas and an expansion of the range of Vedic sacrifice. At this time, Witzel writes, “the social ‘raw material’ present in Rgvedic time was intentionally transformed into what became the core and the pattern first of Vedic and, later on, of Hindu culture.”[3] This religious project, begun under the ambitious Kuru sovereignty, would have profound consequences for the shape of the Vedas, the organization of Vedic society, the character of political rule in early South Asia, and the history of religions in India.

The Structure of the Veda

Kuru leaders set in motion a process by which the liturgical hymns and early practices of sacrifice became the starting point for the formation of a Vedic system of texts and practices of enormous scope and elaboration. Groups of religious specialists, calling themselves Brahmins, carried out this massive intellectual project under the patronage of the Kurus and other ambitious rulers in the Middle Vedic period. Both Brahmin specialists and rulers benefited from this Vedic work, and together they formed an elite in northern India. The project began with the collection, expansion, and compilation of the *Rig Veda Samhita*.

Scripture: The Rig Veda *as a* Samhita

The *Rig Veda* is, as we have seen, a collection of over one thousand hymns composed over several centuries, from roughly 1300 BCE to 1000 BCE. Poets, often identified by name, composed and recited their hymns within the setting of sacrificial performances. Selections of these hymns, the most memorable ones, were passed down within the families of hymn reciters. At some point six of these family collections were brought together, along with additional materials, and assembled into a much larger compilation, a *Samhita*. Within the compilation, each family collection would remain a “book” (or *mandala*, a “cycle” of hymns), but the hymns in each were reordered according to a common pattern. Within each book, hymns to Agni would come first, then those to Indra, and so on for other deities. For each deity, the hymns were arranged by length, with the longest hymns coming first. When two hymns to the same deity, in the same family book, were of the same length, the hymn with the longer meter would come first.[4]

The great effort of collecting and consolidating the *Rig Veda* hymns into a Samhita must have been carried out under a centralized authority or agency, and the best evidence points to the Kuru polity, based in the Kurukshetra region from around 1000 BCE, as initiating this project. Many of the hymns in book ten of the *Rig Veda Samhita*, such as the Purushasukta, were likely composed in the final stages of this effort, and articulate the religious vision that animated the project. Once consolidated, the *Rig Veda Samhita* was fixed or frozen, made stable and unchanging, as an oral scripture.

"Scripture," insists Wilfred Cantwell Smith, is a human activity. "People—a given community—make a text, or keep it scripture: by treating it in a certain way."[5] Within its religious community, the *Rig Veda Samhita* came to be considered inherently holy. As the Purushasukta suggests, its hymns would be seen as coming into being at the moment of creation out of the primordial sacrifice. As an oral scripture, it demanded careful preservation. It was not written, but committed to memory. Even later, when writing was widely available, the Veda was transmitted and maintained in oral form since its power was believed to inhere within its sacred sounds.

This scripturalization of the Vedic hymns altered the role of the hymn reciters. Their primary aim would no longer be to create new expressions of truth, new formulations of *brahman*, by composing new hymns. Now their central tasks would be to maintain and transmit already-existing hymns and to recite them in their proper sacrificial places. The Vedic ritual specialists would commit themselves to these scriptural tasks with extraordinary fidelity over many centuries. To accomplish this, Brahmins organized themselves as a religious community of reciters.

Canon: The Four Samhitas

Along with the consolidation of the *Rig Veda Samhita*, this scripture project assembled additional Vedic materials into other collections. Another Veda compilation would deal with the proper ritual actions and the liturgical formulae to be employed conducting sacrifice—the *Yajur Veda Samhita*. A third work would devote itself to the musical performance of the Vedic hymns—the *Sama Veda Samhita*. These three formed an initial corpus, the Triple Veda. Later, a fourth Vedic compilation, the *Atharva Veda Samhita*, was added. It contained a potpourri of hymns and materials pertinent to rites and practices not addressed in the first three. Together, these four Veda Samhitas comprise the foundation of the Vedic canon.

The collection and composition of the four Vedas took place over several centuries, judging from changes in the language of the texts. The Kuru dynasty began the process. Michael Witzel describes it: "The new Kuru dynasty of Parikshit, living in the Holy Land of Kurukṣetra, unified most of the Ṛgvedic tribes, brought the poets and priests together in the common enterprise of collecting their texts and of 'reforming' the ritual."[6] During this initial Kuru phase, as Witzel reconstructs it, the prototypes or "ur-versions" of the Sama and Yajur Vedas were developed by collecting the prevailing songs and ritual practices. Further elaboration of these initial versions continued under other polities farther east along the Ganges plains. The growth of the Veda corpus reflected the increasing complexity in sacrificial practices during the Middle Vedic period, resulting from the competitive political ambitions of new rulers and patrons as well as the intellectual ambitions of Brahmin priests.

The four separate Vedas corresponded to a division of labor among ritual specialists within larger sacrificial ceremonies. In a public sacrifice, priests would take on different tasks. A Hotri priest ("offerer") loudly recited appropriate hymns from the *Rig Veda*. An Udgatar ("chanter") sang hymns using the elaborate melodies prescribed in the *Sama Veda*. An Adhvaryu ("sacrificer") would quickly recite the sacrificial formulae and perform most of the physical actions of the ritual, following the *Yajur Veda*. A priest affiliated with the *Atharva Veda*, simply identified as the Brahmin, would act as overseer of the rites, for the most part remaining a silent observer. Depending on the scale of the ritual, each of these four might have up to three assistants, so an elaborate sacrifice could require sixteen priests representing the four Vedas.

The Brahmin class organized itself around the tasks involved in this expanded program of scriptures and sacrifice. To act as a Hotri in a ceremony required that the Brahmin priest be an expert in the entire *Rig Veda*, while an Udgatar had to know the *Sama Veda* thoroughly, and so on. Brahmins divided themselves into *shakhas* (literally "branches," usually translated as "schools"), which would devote themselves to mastery of one of the Vedas. Brahmins of the Shakala shakha, for example, would devote themselves to learning and reciting the *Rig Veda* and would act as Hotris in public sacrifices. Those of the Taittiriya shakha concentrated their efforts on the *Yajur Veda* and served as Adhvaryus. The Brahmin shakhas were teaching orders within which the oral scriptures of the four Vedas came to be transmitted over generations. Sacrifice was the event at which the four

Vedas, in the form of Brahmin priests expert in each of them, would reassemble to carry out their interconnecting roles.

The four Veda Samhitas constitute a canon. As with scripture, canon-making is a human activity. It involves the decision that a particular set of works is of special value to a community and that this value will persist over time. Its status may be enhanced by ascribing special authority to it, such as granting it an inspired or divine origin. In the case of the four Vedas, this enhancement already begins in the *Rig Veda*, with the origin story of the Purushasukta, where the contents of the Vedas (its hymns, chants, meters, and sacrificial formula) come straight out of the primordial sacrifice. Myth, as Roland Barthes observes, "has the task of giving an historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal."[7] The canon of the four Vedas, it was said, are not the product of human composition; they are "nonhuman" (*apaurusheya*) in origin. It proved to be a powerful claim. Through Indian religious history, the three or four Vedas as a canon of sacred religious literature have occupied a special place of privilege. Communities of Brahmin reciters devoted themselves to maintaining this canonical set of works, and many within Indian society accepted the prestige of the Vedas. But, as we will see, that status was also repeatedly contested, critiqued, and qualified.

In the Middle Vedic period, the four Vedic Samhitas came to be fixed or frozen as scripture. But these four transmitted by the Brahmin shakhas were not a closed canon. As Jonathan Z. Smith has argued, fixed canons of religious works give rise to the activity of hermeneutics: interpreters "whose task it is continually to extend the domain of the closed canon over everything that is known or everything that exists *without* altering the canon in the process."[8] The original canon of four Vedas gave rise to a vigorous activity of interpretation and extension within the Brahmin shakhas, and this interpretive literature became part of an expanded Vedic canon. This larger Vedic collection included genres of works called Brahmanas, Aranyakas, and Upanishads.

Interpretation: The Brahmanas and the Web of Interconnection

After the four Samhitas, the next strata of works in the Vedic corpus are the Brahmanas. It is an apt name. These were composed by Brahmins for Brahmins, within a particular branch or shakha, and they dealt centrally with the explication of the *brahman*, the sacred words of the Veda. The language of the Brahmanas is Middle Vedic, altered from the earliest form of Vedic Sanskrit found in the Rig

Veda hymns. Altogether, the Brahmanas are a large group of prose texts that form a massive early commentary on the Vedas and on sacrifice. They tell new stories and develop new methods of Vedic hermeneutics.[9]

The Brahmanas also reflect the spread of Vedic culture eastward along the Ganges and the proliferation of Brahmin shakhas. During this period, an aspiring king claiming territorial rule might decide to support an expanded program of Vedic sacrifice to enhance his claim to royal authority. To do so, he would need to bring in Brahmins of all four Vedas, since large sacrifices require four categories of priests.[10] In the eastern Videha region (present-day Bihar), rulers invited Brahmin priests of shakhas attached to the four Samhitas. Through this importation of Brahmins by the branch, the Videha rulers in the east followed the Vedic model first developed in the Kurukshetra area, and they established their own realm as a new center of Vedic culture. This is the setting in which the *Shatapatha Brahmana* (the Brahmana of a "hundred paths"), the largest and best known Brahmana text, was composed. This work is attached to the *Yajur Veda Samhita*. More specifically, it attaches itself to the *White Yajur Veda*, the rearrangement of the *Yajur Veda* carried out by the Vajasaneyin school.[11]

The *Shatapatha Brahmana* follows the ritual prescriptions outlined in the *Yajur Veda Samhita* and offers a running explication of the underlying reasons for each sacrificial act. Many of its explanations take the form of mythical narratives involving the Devas and the Asuras, the gods and the nongods. In these stories, the Devas and the Asuras are locked in an endless back-and-forth competition to win control of the world. Most often their efforts to gain advantage boil down to matters of sacrifice. When the Devas fail to pronounce the mantras correctly, the Asuras become temporarily victorious. If the Asuras make an oblation improperly, the Devas regain control. When the Asuras build fortresses in the three worlds, the Devas lay siege with sacrificial offerings of ghee. Understanding and proper performance of sacrifice prove to be the keys to divine victory.

One such story expands on the "three steps" of Vishnu, as mentioned in the earlier *Rig Veda*, to explain the role of the altar (*vedi*) in a sacrifice. It begins in the midst of battle, with the Asuras ahead.

> The Gods and the Asuras, both born of Prajapati, battled for supremacy. The Gods fell behind, and the Asuras thought that the entire earth belonged to them. They said to one another, "Let us divide up the earth, and when we have divided it, we can live on it." With bull-hides they divided it from west to east and went there. The Gods heard about this. "Those Asuras are dividing up the earth. Let's go quickly to where they are dividing it. What will become of us if we do not receive a share?"

The Devas have a secret weapon: the god Vishnu, identified as the sacrifice. Like the sacrifice, Vishnu may appear as a diminutive dwarf, but he is actually all-encompassing.

> And so they went there, led by Vishnu, who is actually the sacrifice. The Gods said to the Asuras, "Please let us share in this earth with you. Give us a part of it." Irritated, the Asuras answered, "We will give you only as much as this Vishnu covers." Now, Vishnu was a dwarf. But the Gods were not offended. They realized that they had been given a great deal, since Vishnu is equal to the sacrifice. So they laid Vishnu to the east and enclosed him on three sides with the meters . . . When they had enclosed him on the three sides with the meters, they kindled the sacrificial fire Agni in the east, and with great effort they made sacrificial offerings with him. In this way, using Vishnu, they obtained the entire earth.

The Asuras fail to recognize that Vishnu, as the sacrifice, encompasses the entire earth. In later retellings of this story, the dwarf Vishnu actually grows and strides over the three worlds in three great steps. The *Shatapatha* account ends by drawing the application of the story to the proper understanding of the altar within a sacrifice.

> And since they obtained the entire earth with him, they call the place of sacrifice the *vedi* (altar). It is said, "The altar is equal in extent to the earth," because with the altar the Gods regained the entire earth. And one who understands this will certainly seize the entire earth from one's opponents and exclude them from sharing in it.
> (ShBr 1.2.5.1-7)

Standing above the Devas and the Asuras is a new divine figure, Prajapati, the Lord of All Beings. Both gods and nongods come from Prajapati—the Devas from his upper portions, the Asuras from his lower. In fact, all the world comes from Prajapati. He alone existed in the beginning, and only through his desire to procreate or emanate does the world exist. In the Brahmanas, Prajapati takes on the role first assigned to Purusha in the late hymn of the *Rig Veda*. Like Purusha, Prajapati is a primordial being who stands apart and before creation, and like Purusha he is closely associated with sacrifice. Prajapati is both one and many, unmanifest and manifest, limited and unlimited. There is something paradoxical and unknowable about this primordial being. One name for Prajapati is the interrogative pronoun, *kah*, "Who? What?" Within the development of Vedic metaphysics, Purusha and then Prajapati can be seen as early articulations of a unitary principle, the idea of a singular Absolute.

According to the Brahmanas, Prajapati's task of emitting the whole world is hard work for him. More than just needing to rest on the seventh day, the texts tell us, Prajapati was "milked out," drained, exhausted, falling apart at the seams after creating the cosmos. The breath goes out of him. His limbs go limp and he cannot rise. In his postcreation state of lassitude, Prajapati needs to be restored—and this is where sacrifice comes in. Prajapati calls on Agni, the sacrificial fire, to resuscitate him. The gods, who have emerged from Prajapati, must now reintegrate their creator. They do so through the rites of sacrifice. "Unlike all the king's horses and all the king's men," observes Brian K. Smith, "the gods, employing the connective power of ritual, *can* put the shattered Prajapati or his creation back together again."[12] And just as the gods do, so humans are called upon to perform the restorative actions of sacrifice on behalf of Prajapati and his creation.

The origin story of Prajapati's emanation of the cosmos in the *Shatapatha Brahmana* places sacrifice in a central position, bridging the polarities of the primordial being and manifest creation. Scholars sometimes refer to sacrifice as a "mesocosm," in between the macrocosm of Prajapati's created world and the microcosm of the human person. Sacrifice mirrors or connects these other levels of reality. The world in which sacrifice acts is a web of interconnections. It is crucial to know these connections, or *bandhus* ("bonds," from a shared Indo-European root). But they are not always obvious or perceptible. With the hermeneutic guidance of the *Shatapatha Brahmana*, a Brahmin priest of the *Yajur Veda* conducting a sacrifice could come to understand the connections between what he is doing within the ritual and the world beyond it.

Sciences: The Limbs of the Veda

As Vedic religious culture extended its sway across northern India during the Middle Vedic period, Brahmins expanded their program of sacrificial ritual, and new elites sponsored their performance. In their shakhas, Brahmins transmitted the four Veda Samhitas and added to the canon new interpretive works: first the Brahmanas, then the Aranyakas ("forest teachings"), and finally the more speculative Upanishads. (The final addition of Upanishads to the Vedic corpus represented a new phase in philosophical thought and will be discussed in the next chapter.) All these works provided expansive ways of understanding the sacrifice.

Alongside these interpretive works, effective sacrifice also required good technique. This calls for precise knowledge. How must one pronounce the words of the Veda correctly? How can one understand the meaning of a hymn from its grammar? How does one calculate the exact time to perform a ritual? Disciplines of knowledge began to take shape in the Middle Vedic period to address these and other practical questions. To the Veda itself were added six Vedangas, "limbs" or extensions of Vedic learning:

Phonetics (*shiksha*)
Grammar (*vyakarana*)
Etymology (*nirukta*)
Prosody (*chandas*)
Astronomy (*jyotisha*)
Ritual procedure (*kalpa*)

These were the earliest Indian sciences, in the Aristotelian sense of orderly systematic study about a definite subject matter.[13] Science in India arose from sacrifice.

Since language, in the sense of the powerful words of the Veda, was of key importance in sacrifice, it is not surprising that four of the Vedangas dealt with linguistic subjects. Phonetics was the earliest of these. Correct pronunciation was crucial in maintaining the integrity of the Vedas and applying them effectively in ritual. But the most highly developed was the science of grammar, and it reached an early fruition in the work of Panini, the *Vyakarana Sutra* also known as the *Ashtadhyayi* ("eight lessons"). Panini set out to analyze the Sanskrit language as spoken by its best speakers, namely the religious specialists of his time. He described the fundamental grammar of this language in terms of its most basic elements, its rules of transformation, and its system of phonetic modifications. To carry out this analysis in the most succinct possible manner, Panini developed a "metalanguage" that was, in Pierre-Sylvain Filliozat's estimation, "the first example of the formalization of technical exposition in the world history of science."[14] Panini's work is dated to around the fifth century BCE, but it is clear that he was summarizing and formalizing the work of other earlier grammarians. He refers to seven predecessors. Their works have not survived, no doubt because Panini's remarkable work superseded them and made them unnecessary. So successful was Panini's descriptive analysis that it has remained the foundational grammar of Sanskrit for the two and a half millennia since.

Unlike the Brahmanas, the Vedangas were not attached to particular Vedic shakhas. They were forms of knowledge valuable to all Vedic specialists, arising from the requirements of sacrifice. As Lagadha put it in his *Jyotisha Vedanga* of the fifth century BCE:

> For the Vedas have come forth for the sacrifice, and sacrifices are established in orderly succession of times. Therefore, he who knows this *jyotisha*, the science of determining times, knows the sacrifice.[15]

But specialists in these ancillary Vedic sciences would soon extend their disciplinary reach beyond the needs of sacrifice. Practitioners of Jyotisha engaged not just in the science of determining time, but also in astronomical observations, horoscope-based astrology, and the art of divination, or omen-reading. Astronomers composed the earliest works on mathematics in India. Likewise in the science of grammar, later specialists like Katyayana (third century BCE) and Patanjali (second century BCE) wrote commentaries expanding on Panini's concise formulations and venturing into the philosophy of language. The earliest sciences in India may have been limbs of the Veda, but many other expert disciplines of knowledge would develop after them, devoted to such subject matter as hermeneutics, medicine, weaponry, music, politics, righteous conduct, and the science of pleasure. We will look at several of these in later chapters.

The Purposes of Sacrifice

Sacrifice is found widely among religious cultures of the world—among the Egyptians, the ancient Israelites, the Greeks and Romans, the Aztecs, and many others. It involves giving up things from oneself to some divine recipient. As the Indic definition has it, sacrifice is the abandonment (*tyaga*) of substances (*dravya*) intending them for a divinity (*devata*).[16] This abandonment in turn brings benefits to the offerer or community. In their classic 1898 comparative study, French sociologists Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss offer a broad definition: "Sacrifice is a religious act which, through the consecration of a victim, modifies the condition of the moral person who accomplishes it or that of certain objects with which he is concerned."[17] But in early India, the Vedas envisioned sacrifice as serving much broader purposes than this.

The Vedic form of sacrifice migrated into the Indian subcontinent along with Indo-Aryan speakers. (There may have been sacrificial practices among earlier indigenous inhabitants, of course, but these remain unrecorded.) In the earliest accounts, found in the hymns of the *Rig Veda*, sacrifice is a ritual of hospitality offered by humans to a varied group of gods. It centers around a sacrificial fire, Agni, who is a god. Agni conveys oblations to the other gods, who are invisibly present. Along with material offerings, the human hosts offer up hymns of praise to the gods. By pleasing them with offerings and praise, the human sacrificers make the gods well disposed and seek to obtain benefits from them.

In the Middle Vedic period, Brahmins and their patrons developed this basic sacrifice into an elaborate system of rites, which they believed to exercise great power in the world. Since sacrifice itself was seen as the common source of both gods and humans, as the Purushasukta indicated, gods were also dependent on sacrifice. Not simply pleasing the gods, sacrifice could compel them. By this expanded conception, sacrifice brought about vast results. It could sustain the cosmos in its cyclical harmony, it could bring fertility and abundance to human society, and it could confer personal powers onto those who sponsored sacrifices. This sacrificial system included small and large rituals, all of which shared a basic set of practices. Some sacrifices were considered regular and obligatory (*nitya*), while others were occasional or optional (*kamya*). Regular sacrifice in the Vedic system was closely tied to the passage of time.

Time and Sacrifice

The *Shatapatha Brahmana* explains the cosmogonic connection between regular sacrifice and time.

> After Prajapati had created the living beings, his joints (*parvan*) were relaxed. Now Prajapati, doubtless, is the year, and his joints are the two junctions of day and night (i.e., the twilights), the full moon and new moon, and the beginnings of the seasons. He was unable to rise with his relaxed joints;

Those liminal moments of transition, the interstices between regular units of time, are the joints of the creator god. These are dangerous passages, when time could come undone, and they must be strengthened with sacrificial offerings. This was first done by the gods, as the Brahmana account continues.

> And the gods healed him by means of these havis-offerings: by means of the Agnihotra they healed that joint (which consists of) the two junctions of day and night, joined that together; by means of the full-moon and the new-moon sacrifice they healed that joint (which consists of) the full and new moon, joined that together; and by means of the (three) Caturmasyas (seasonal offerings) they healed that joint (which consists of) the beginnings of the seasons, joined that together. With his joints thus repaired he betook himself to this food—to the food which is here (offered) to Prajapati;

At this point, the Brahmana shifts its focus from the paradigmatic act of the gods in healing time to that of the human performing a sacrifice of lunar transition. Those offering this sacrifice should understand their actions as likewise healing the lax joints of Prajapati.

> And he who, knowing this, enters upon the fast at the very time (of full moon), heals Prajapati's joint at the proper time, and Prajapati favors him. (ShBr 1.6.3.35-37)

One purpose of Vedic sacrifice, as the Brahmanas understand it, is to maintain time in the orderly cyclical passages of solar days and nights, lunar months of waxing and waning moons, and seasons of the solar year.

The simplest and most recurrent of the regular sacrifices is the Agnihotra, offered twice daily at the moments of transition between night and day, at sunrise and sunset. This is a modest domestic ceremony. The male householder, accompanied by his wife, makes offerings of milk and ghee into their domestic fire, and he recites mantras from the Veda. The Agnihotra takes only about fifteen minutes to perform, but it still comprises around one hundred specific ritual actions.

More complex are the sacrifices linked to lunar passages, the new-moon and full-moon days, when the moon shifts from its waning to waxing direction and then from waxing to waning. These rituals are classified as *ishthis*, sacrifices that require the services of four priests, embodying the four Vedas, in addition to the sacrificer and his wife. The sacrificer, identified as the *yajamana* ("one who sacrifices on his own behalf"), is the patron or sponsor. He supplies provisions for the ritual, invites the officiating priests, and receives the spiritual benefits from offering the sacrifice, though he does not perform the liturgical actions. The four priests do those. At the end of the rites, the sacrificer presents the priests with a reward or honorarium, known as a *dakshina*.

Still more elaborate are the sacrifices tied to the seasons of the year. The Vedic calendar divides the year into three four-month seasons: Spring, Rains, and Autumn. At each seasonal transition, on a full-moon day, a Chaturmasya ("four-monthly") sacrifice should be performed. The Chaturmasya rituals also involve a sacrificer, his wife, and multiple priests, in this case five priests. Although the sacrificer does not perform the rites, he is required to observe certain austerities. To engage in the sacred rites of sacrifice, the sacrificer must himself attain a greater personal sacrality or ritual purity. He shaves his head and face, abjures any bodily decorations, sleeps on the ground, avoids honey and meat, and abstains from sexual intercourse. In more complex sacrifices, this ascetic regime observed by the yajamana is known as *diksha*, an "initiation" into the sacred time of sacrifice, and it can last for long periods of up to a year or more.

The Vedas classify sacrifices according to the principal substances abandoned to divine recipients. The regular sacrifices, up to the Chaturmasyas, are vegetarian affairs. Priests make oblations of ghee, milk, and cakes of grain into the sacrificial fire. But in larger, more elaborate sacrifices, animals are the sacrificial victims. On the two solstices of the solar year, liminal moments in the course of the sun, one should offer an animal sacrifice, Pashubandha ("tying of the animal" to a sacrificial post), involving six priests. The largest sacrifices involve the preparation and offering of Soma. Within the Vedic system, larger sacrifices incorporate smaller ones. A Soma sacrifice like the Jyotishthoma will include numerous offerings of vegetarian oblations and animal sacrifices in addition to its central rite of Soma offering.

Sacrifice and Ritual Power

The large sacrifices are generally optional. They are classified as *kamya* since they are performed out of a desire (*kama*) for satisfying human wishes. A sacrificer can sponsor an optional sacrifice to gain worldly ends such as good health, sons, flourishing livestock, or more long-term spiritual goals like heaven. Of course, sponsoring sacrificial rituals that involve greater provisions and personnel also serves as an index of one's own political power and wealth. These larger sacrificial ceremonies could be public events, with many priests reciting hymns, singing, and conducting rites. They could take many days or even years to perform. A sacrifice lasting twelve days or more is called a *sattra*, a "sitting" or sacrificial session. These sessions are also occasions for activities and performances not strictly part of the sacrifice itself, such as religious debate (*brahmodya*) and the recitation of bardic poetry. As we will see in chapter 8, the later Sanskrit epic poems *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* recount that their own original performances took place during lengthy royal sacrificial sessions.

The most striking of the optional sacrifices are the "royal sacrifices" linked to a ruler's claim to dominion over people and territory. These are the Rajasuya (the royal consecration) and the Ashvamedha (the horse sacrifice). The Raja acts as the yajamana and must supply the lavish provisions required for the lengthy session. For his efforts he gains the worldly end of ruling power (*kshatra*). The growth of the Rajasuya and Ashvamedha in the Middle Vedic period reflected the desire of ambitious new Rajas across northern India to fashion themselves as territorial sovereigns. The Vedic system offered a powerful means for them to manifest their authority.

The royal consecration or Rajasuya (literally the "pressing out of a king") is a lengthy sacrificial complex lasting up to a year. It is built up out of a series of Vedic rites, including numerous ishtis of cakes and ghee, animal sacrifices, and

Soma pressings. But it also involves several unique features: a chariot drive, a dicing contest, and an "affusion" of the sacrifice. The affusion or *abhisheka* ("sprinkling down") is central to the entire ritual.[18] Pots of highly consecrated liquids are poured over the head of the royal patron, conferring powers onto his body and creating him as king. In effect, the abhisheka rite within the Rajasuya inaugurates and empowers the ruler, acting as yajamana, into kingship.

To perform the abhisheka, priests carefully prepare pots of liquid decoctions, infusing them with Vedic mantras. Meanwhile, the royal sacrificer is also prepared. His body is purified and anointed, he is clothed with special garments, and he is given bow and arrows. He then stands on a tiger skin, facing east, with his arms raised. Four persons, holding pots of liquid, stand in the four cardinal directions around him: the chief priest in front, a member of the warrior class to the south, a Vaishya to the west, and a kinsman to the north. Thus he is surrounded by the three upper classes of the Vedic social order, the ones eligible to participate in Vedic rites. The priest recites a formula asking the gods to activate the sacrificer's speech, breath, sight, and hearing. Then, as the four persons pour the liquid from their vessels over the head of the king-to-be, the priest recites from the *Yajur Veda*:

> With Soma's glory I sprinkle you.
> With Agni's glow I sprinkle you.
> With Surya's splendor I sprinkle you.
> With Indra's energy I sprinkle you.
> (ShBr 5.4.2.2)

The affused sacrificer rubs the liquids over his body and asks that this vigor spread through his entire self. At the conclusion of the rite, the priest has the newly empowered king take three Vishnu-steps, all within the stretched-out tiger skin.

The abhisheka within the Rajasuya is a performative rite: it makes the sacrificer into a king. Within the Vedic worldview, the rite confers onto the new king the powers of gods. Their vigor infuses his entire being. But going beyond even that, the rite also has cosmic implications for those who understand the bandhus, the connections between cosmos, sacrifice, and person.[19] The king is identified with Prajapati. The place of the sacrifice is a replica of the universe. The upright king is the cosmic pillar. His new body expands to the four quarters. And his three Vishnu-strides, even though just within the space of a tiger skin, encompass the three worlds, just as the dwarf Vishnu had done at the sacrifice of the Asuras.

In the Middle Vedic period, the Rajasuya served as a dramatic ceremonial proclamation for a new king. Even more dramatic, however, was the expansive claim of an ambitious ruler who chose to perform the Ashvamedha, or horse sacrifice. In Vedic times, as historian Ronald Inden puts it, the Ashvamedha was "the combative rite by which a Kṣatriya warrior-king proclaimed his temporary hegemony over his rivals."[20] This ritual was not to be undertaken lightly, however, since those rivals in neighboring territories might well decide to oppose his claim to hegemony.

Like the Rajasuya, the Ashvamedha is a complex yearlong sacrificial session built up out of many smaller constituent rites, and like the Rajasuya, it features a distinctive central action. A white stallion is carefully purified and consecrated. Priests ritually identify it both with the royal sacrificer and with the warrior god Indra. Then they release the horse to roam for one year. Any lands it enters during this time are claimed as belonging to the domain of the king. In practice, a regiment of the royal army would trail the horse in its wanderings and might encourage its direction based on military calculations. When the horse enters a rival ruler's lands, that rival has a choice to make. Either he accepts the overlordship of the king performing the Ashvamedha, or he comes out to oppose it with his own military forces. Symbolic sacrificial action leads to real combat.

Meanwhile, during the horse's *wanderjahr*, the chief priest and his assistants continue to offer daily sacrificial rites for the safety of the horse. The king continues to observe the behavioral austerities of his diksha, his initiation into the sacrifice. There are other performances as well. In the morning, while the priest makes his offerings, two Brahmin vina players are to sing the praises of the royal sacrificer, focusing on his patronage of sacrifices and his generosity to Brahmins. During sunset offerings, a bard of the warrior class extols the king's heroic military exploits in musical verse. Each evening the four primary officiating priests, the king and his retinue, and other interested parties assemble near the fire altar for Veda recitations, discourses, and debates. As a large public gathering of elites, the Ashvamedha serves as a social location in which various genres of religious literature are performed and nurtured.[21]

The horse returns at the end of a year, with great celebration. It is then suffocated as a sacrificial victim. But before it can be cooked and served as an offering to the gods, one more distinctive rite must be performed. The king's chief wife is brought up to the corpse and, under cover of a linen cloth, she copulates with the dead horse. At this point, it will be well to make some broader observations about the role of women and sexuality within the world of sacrifice.

Sex in the Sacrifice

When humans emerge from the primordial sacrifice, according to the Purushasukta, they do not come out divided by gender. There are no Adams and Eves, no male and female, in this origin story. Instead, humans appear divided into four classes. The primordial being himself is called "Male," and the default assumption throughout the Vedas is one of male practice. The Brahmins who hear and recite the Vedas and who officiate at the sacrifices are all male. The sponsoring yajamanas are men. The gods who attend the sacrificial ceremonies are almost entirely male. Women are not eligible to learn the Veda, and therefore they are not able to offer sacrifice on their own. The world of sacrifice is a deeply patriarchal one.

But women are not entirely excluded from the ritual terrain. To offer a sacrifice, the yajamana must be married, and his wife is a necessary participant in his sacrificial activities. She is not usually at the center of the action, but she does serve several important purposes. In a comprehensive analysis of the sacrificer's wife in the Vedas, Indologist Stephanie Jamison identifies three principal thematic roles of the wife in Vedic sacrifice: that of the domestic realm, that of sexuality and fertility, and that of hospitality and exchange.[22] In large goal-oriented sacrifices such as Ashvamedha, it is the theme of sexuality and fertility that is the most prominent of these.

A fundamental purpose throughout the Vedic system of sacrifice is to bring about fertility and worldly abundance. Sacrifice calls forth the rains that issue bountiful crops and pastures. Through sacrifice cattle breed and livestock multiply. Sacrifice assists humans in procreation and nurturance of offspring. All this fertility is sexual in nature, and this requires females. Wives are crucial in sacrifice since "they act as the conduit to introduce sexual energy into the potentially sterile world of the orderly ritual."[23] Within sacrifices the wife is called upon to perform several ritual actions. Most are minor ones, but they are repeatedly understood as bearing a sexual connotation. As the Vedic texts state over and over, "What the wife does in ritual is sexual pairing." Sexual intercourse is crucial to procreation and abundance. The *Shatapatha Brahmana* spells out the links between sacrifice, sexual pairing, and offspring.

> From sacrifice offspring are indeed generated, and the offspring generated from sacrifice are conceived through sexual intercourse. Offspring conceived through sexual intercourse are generated after the completion of the sacrifice.

> Therefore one causes offspring to be conceived through sexual intercourse after the sacrifice is completed. Thus from sexual intercourse after the completion of sacrifice, offspring are generated. (ShBr 1.9.2.5)

The sexual pairing of the chief queen with the just-slaughtered white stallion moves this theme to the center of the action. After the horse has been suffocated, the queen is led up to it, accompanied by other royal wives and female attendants. They circumambulate it, and then the queen lies down with the horse. She invites it to stretch out its legs with hers. The priest covers them with a linen cloth. The queen takes the penis of the horse and places it in her lap, and repeats, "May this potent male, producer of semen, generate his semen!" (ShBr 13.5.2.2) (Jamison notes that the horse's death by suffocation induces "reflex-conditioned tumescence and emission."[24]) While his wife tries to copulate with the horse under cover, the husband recites bawdy verses. The queen may berate the horse for being asleep when it needs to be vigorous. The other wives nearby recite verses with explicit erotic references. Finally the queen is allowed to get up, and the ceremony returns to its usual formal and dignified style. All who have said impure things now recite a verse from the *Rig Veda* to purify their speech.

This episode appears, in one sense, as a transgressive overturning of ritual decorum, a brief carnivalesque interlude within the sacrifice. After the queen is escorted off the scene, the priests place the horse in the sacrificial fire so the gods can partake of the offering. But this episode also highlights in dramatic fashion the role of sexuality in the sacrifice. If sacrifice claims, as the *Shatapatha Brahmana* puts it, to produce offspring, then it must incorporate sexuality as its procreative instrument.

Veda, Sacrifice, and Society

According to the Purushasukta, human society originates with the primordial sacrifice of Purusha. Four groups are "portioned" out of parts of this original being. The mouth is the Brahmin. His arms form the Rajanya or Kshatriyas, the rulers or warriors. From the thighs are made the Vaishyas, and the Shudras come from his feet. In the final section of the *Rig Veda Samhita*, this is the earliest articulation of an Indic social system consisting of four classes or *varnas* (literally, "colors"). Later Vedic works repeat this fourfold division and take it for granted. During the Middle Vedic period, the mythical origin of the four classes is promulgated as a social reality, at least by the Brahmins.

Class and Caste

It is important to make a few observations about what this origin story of four classes implies, and what it does not say. First, as a myth, it envisions and reifies a social order that is both organic and hierarchically divided. All humans come from a single body, that of primordial Purusha. But they emerge from different parts of that body, and those body parts are symbolic of distinct social functions. There is a division of labor in the myth. Brahmins, from the mouth of Purusha, are those who speak the sacred words of the Veda. Kshatriyas, from the arms, are the armed warriors who rule and protect society. The Vaishyas, from the loins, are materially productive, and the Shudras, from the feet, serve the other classes. Bodily origins also correlate to a hierarchy of status. Coming from the highest portion of Purusha's body, the Brahmins assume the highest prestige in this Vedic social order while the Shudras are consigned to the lowest rung. The Purushasukta provides a mythical sanction for social inequality.

Despite the use of the term "varna" (color) for these social groupings, this is not an ethnic or racial division. In fact, the fourfold scheme in Middle Vedic works largely replaces the earlier binary division of Arya and Dasa. Nor is the varna division the same as the famous "caste system." Often taken as the distinctive and timeless social institution of India, caste is a later development, though just when caste begins is a matter of lengthy dispute among historians. In this book, I translate varna as "class," not as caste. However, the model of four classes presented in Vedic works does articulate some features of the later system—such as a hierarchy of status and occupational divisions—and may be seen as an ideological ancestor of caste society.

In the Middle Vedic period, the new model of four social classes presented in the Purushasukta offered a flexible scheme for an expanding Aryan culture. No longer based on a single division of insider Aryans and outsiders, this model allowed for incorporation of new groups into Aryan society, based on function and acceptance of cultural norms. Local chieftains who exercised political power (*kshatra*) could become Kshatriyas by undergoing the ritual consecrations of the Vedas. This may have been the pattern followed by the rulers in the Videha region, for example, when they invited several branches of Vedic Brahmins to move into their territory and perform suitable sacrifices. At the bottom of the hierarchy, the category of Shudras enabled the inclusion of groups formerly outside the Aryan fold, albeit at a servile level. Across northern India, some indigenous communities joined into this Aryan order while others kept their distance from it. The Brahmanas recognized some categories of the outsiders by name:

Kiratas, Nishadas, Chandalas, and others. The four classes did not encompass all humanity.

Inside the fourfold class organization there was another division, between those eligible to participate in Vedic sacrifice and those not allowed. The upper three varnas were "twice-born" (*dvija*) classes. The males of these groups could be born a second time, by being initiated into the Veda. This was a religious privilege denied to Shudras. Vedic texts reinforced this by referring back to their origins. "Even if he possesses abundant livestock, a Shudra is not allowed to perform sacrifice," says one Brahmana, "and so he does not go beyond washing the feet of the other classes, since he was emitted from the feet of Purusha."[25] The class distinction was not an economic one. As the text indicates, Shudras could be wealthy, but this did not affect their status with regard to Vedic religious culture. Similarly, at the top of the scale, the high privilege accorded to Brahmins had nothing to do with possessing material wealth. Their status, they claimed, came with their possession of the Veda. Brahmins who have learned and teach the Veda, says the *Shatapatha Brahmana*, are "human gods" (ShBr 2.2.2.6).

Vedic Brahmins: A Community of Reciters

The division of four varnas, first presented in the Purushasukta, was an ideological composition of Brahmin poets, and it certainly promoted the interests of the Brahmin class. In the Middle Vedic period, Brahmins organized themselves as a community, and they gave themselves certain key responsibilities: officiating at public sacrifices, learning and passing on the oral scriptures of the Vedas, and interpreting their teachings. We can know about their activities thanks to their great success as a community of reciters who transmitted the Vedic corpus.

Other twice-born classes might be eligible to perform simple Vedic rites like Agnihotra, but for all the more elaborate sacrifices it was necessary to engage Brahmin priests. Only a sacerdotal specialist could invest the extensive time required to memorize the hymns and detailed ritual actions. Therefore Kshatriyas and Vaishyas participated in sacrifice in the role of yajamana or patron. They would invite Brahmin officiants, provide the necessary material provisions, and reap the spiritual benefit.

As religious specialists, Brahmins organized a canon of Vedic oral scripture and set about the daunting task of maintaining this vast literature within their collective memory. This required, first of all, a division of mnemonic labor. With four lengthy Samhitas and ancillary works, it had become implausible for an individual to master the entire Vedic canon. Brahmins organized themselves into shakhas or Vedic "schools" that would dedicate themselves to one particular Vedic Samhita, more specifically to one recension of that Samhita along with its affiliated Brahmana, Aranyaka, and Upanishad. Second, it required an institution of mnemonic training. During the Middle Vedic period, Brahmins began to institute a period of intense studentship. Young Brahmin males, at age eight or so, would become *brahmacharins* ("one who practices the sacred words of the Veda"). Living in the home of a teacher, they would spend six to ten years memorizing and mastering the Veda of their particular shakha.

The curriculum of these homeschools consisted of oral memorization: from the mouth of the teacher to the ear of the student, implanted in the memory. We often think of oral transmission as inherently inaccurate. The old children's game of "telephone," in which a group of participants whisper a message from person to person, resulting in a humorous mutation of the original, illustrates the likelihood of erroneous transmission. But the Vedic Brahmins considered the words of the Veda to be powerful and efficacious as sound, and so they dedicated themselves to accurate recitation of the highest fidelity. This required a mnemonic pedagogy, incorporating multiple methods of recitation.

The same text can be learned in multiple ways. The young Brahmacharin would first learn the Samhita of his shakha in its normal or natural form, reproducing the normal way the work would be recited. In Sanskrit, words are often conjoined and modified through a process the grammarians call *sandhi*, or euphonic combination. The second way the Brahmacharin would learn the same Samhita would involve separating each word, removing those euphonic modifications, and making a brief pause between each word. This was called the "word recitation" method. A third way to learn the same Samhita was the "step-recitation." The Brahmacharin would recite the first two words, then the second and third words, the third and fourth, and so on, step by step. To ensure absolute accuracy, still other methods were added to these, such as the "twisted-hair recitation" and the "dense-recitation" method.

Word-recitation	a b c d e
Step-recitation	ab bc cd de
Twisted-hair recitation	ab ba ab bc cb bc cd dc cd de ed de
Dense-recitation	ab ba abc cba abc abc bc cb bcd dcb bcd

Later texts codified eleven such methods in all. By memorizing the same text in multiple ways, it was possible to prevent any errors in remembering the basic Samhita.[26]

Brahmins insisted on oral transmission of the Vedas, even in later centuries when writing became common in India. The power of the Veda resided in its sound. The later exegete Kumarila Bhatta decreed that the Veda was useless if acquired from a written source.[27] Oral transmission also allowed the custodians of the Vedas to limit their availability and to exclude those women, Shudras, and outsiders who, they believed, might weaken the power of the Veda through their contact.

Outside the Veda

The Vedas set forth a world of sacrifice that is capacious but also has significant social boundaries. Some groups are inside the Veda, and others are outside the sacrificial pale.

It is important to bear in mind that the reconstruction of the world of sacrifice, the dominant religious formation of the Middle Vedic period, is based on verbal texts that articulate the practices and values of social elites in northern India. These sources were carefully organized and scrupulously transmitted by a class of religious specialists, and they clearly reflect the interests of that class. The Vedic texts tell us a great deal about those concerns. But what about other classes of humans who were not included within that sacrificial world?

Within the four-class varna system, Shudras are included as part of the Aryan social order, but they are excluded from learning the Veda or participating in Veda-based sacrifice. The Shudra male is born only once, while males of the three upper classes are born a second time, into the Veda, at initiation. This category offered a way of incorporating and assimilating new indigenous groups into the broader Aryan culture at a subordinate or inferior position, at the feet of the other classes. The Vedic texts define this social class largely in terms of disallowances, but they say little about the nature or character of Shudra communities. The Shudras themselves undoubtedly had their own varied religious practices and worshipped their own gods, but they were not in a position to record these for posterity. Over the centuries, however, interactions between elites and marginalized Shudra classes have always occurred, and Shudra gods and religious practices have been "universalized."

The Vedic texts also recognize the existence of other communities beyond the Aryan social order. They mention the Nishadas, a group of hunter-gatherer tribes who maintained an autonomous social existence. Even as the Aryan culture began to dominate the landscape of the northern Indian plains, there were many such indigenous communities who remained unassimilated. Such "forest-people" remained a continuing presence on the outskirts of settled Indic society through history, engaging in trade relations but maintaining a wary distance. Nowadays, tribal communities in modern India call themselves Adivasis, the "original inhabitants," and trace themselves back to ancient groups like the Nishadas.

Finally, the Vedas mention another social category: the Chandala. This term designates a group that is considered at the lowest place in society, beneath the order of the four classes. In the later Veda-based Dharmasutras, the Chandalas are portrayed as "untouchable" (*asprishya*); if a twice-born person comes into contact with a Chandala, he should immediately bathe. In these later texts, they are pejoratively called "dog eaters" and "outcasts" who must dwell outside the boundaries of a village or town. We see here the earliest appearance of the Untouchable, the most stigmatized group in Indic society. In modern India, this large community has abandoned that unlovely term and renamed itself the Dalits, the "oppressed."

Shudras, Nishadas, and Chandalas receive only the briefest mention in the early Vedic scriptures. But it is good to be reminded that the Vedas did not aim at proportional representation. In his environmental history of India, Michael Fisher cites modern population figures to emphasize the point. The three twice-born classes comprise about 20 percent of the Hindu population, while Shudras are over half. The remaining quarter of the settled population are the "untouchables" outside the four classes. Forest dwellers, with no place in the scheme of varnas, represent a dwindling portion of the Indian population, but in early times it would have been much larger.[28]

The Legacy of the Veda

In the final book of the *Rig Veda*, the Purushasukta articulated a powerful vision. At the beginning of things, an all-encompassing Being was sacrificed, and from that primordial sacrifice came the cosmos in its most significant categories: the three worlds, the heavenly bodies, the gods, the species of animals, humans in their four classes, and the hymns, songs, and formulae of the Veda. It offered, as Indologist Madeleine Biardeau has observed, "the first Brahmanic philosophy": that "the cosmos is the product of sacrifice, and sacrifice is the source of everything."[29]

In the Middle Vedic period, this first philosophy instigated a religious project. Brahmins organized themselves as a class of religious specialists who assumed the responsibility for maintaining the sacred text and performing sacrificial rites. They developed the Vedas into a veritable library of oral scripture, which they transmitted faithfully within their Vedic shakhas. In collaboration with tribal chieftains, fashioning themselves as territorial rulers across northern India, Brahmin liturgists developed a larger and more dramatic program of sacrificial ceremonies that could articulate and reinforce the sovereign powers of rulers.

This powerful and compelling religious culture rested on three key terms: Veda, sacrifice, and Brahmin. The Veda formed a body of sacred scripture whose oral sounds (*brahman*) held inherent power. Sacrifice was an elaborate system of ritual practices employing the Vedic hymns that sustained the cosmos in its order, maintained harmonious relations between humans and their gods, and brought worldly benefits to its patrons. Brahmins constituted a sacerdotal class responsible for reciting and transmitting the Vedas and for performing sacrifice on behalf of all society. Brahmins enjoyed a special social status by virtue of birth and training. Biardeau argues that this sacrificial religious culture formed a "fundamental unity of the religion of the Hindus," a kind of deep structure underlying the diversity of subsequent Hindu beliefs and practices.[30] We will see, in subsequent chapters, many of the ways this Vedic culture did maintain itself in new manifestations, and ways that later Indic traditions affiliated themselves with the ancient Veda.

But, as we will also see, the terms of this culture were themselves not stable, nor were the assumptions behind them accepted by all. Others would pose questions and offer alternative answers: What is a Veda? What is the best, most effective sacrifice? Who qualifies as a Brahmin? The world of sacrifice presented a hegemonic religious formation for its time, but it also set the stage for subsequent debate and dynamic changes in religious cultures.

4

A New Urban Culture and Renunciatory Religion (600–300 BCE)

IN HERMANN HESSE'S 1922 novel *Siddhartha*, the protagonist first appears as a young Brahmin living somewhere in northern India in the sixth century BCE.[1] Siddhartha has been trained by his father and his community in the teachings of the Vedas and its sacrificial practices. No doubt he has spent much of his youth in a shakha memorizing a lengthy Veda and reflecting on its significance. The expectation is that Siddhartha will follow in his father's footsteps and take his place in society as a learned and respected Brahmin priest.

However, Siddhartha has other ideas. He is dissatisfied with the knowledge he has gained from his teachers.

> The ablutions were good [he reflects], but they were only water; they could not wash away sin, could not quench his mind's thirst or dispel his heart's fear. The sacrifices and the invocations of the gods were most excellent—but was this all? Did the sacrifices bring happiness? And what of the gods? Was it really Prajapati who had created the world? Was it not rather Atman, He, the Singular, the One and Only? Weren't the gods mere shapes, creations like you and me, subject to time, transitory? And was it then good, was it proper, was it meaningful, a noble act, to sacrifice to the gods?[2]

Siddhartha has begun to seek something greater, more permanent and reliable, than the transitory gods of the Vedas and the worldly sacrifices directed toward them. And so, when three unkempt homeless wanderers, known as "Shramanas," pass through his village, he overcomes his father's anxious objections, leaves behind his family and community, and joins them.

With this first renunciation, Siddhartha enters into a quest that will lead him through many of the social worlds of his time and place. First he lives with the mendicants and learns their ascetic practices. He meditates and subjects his body to grueling austerities to eradicate the ego. But this, too, leaves him disappointed, and he abandons the ascetics. He travels to the outskirts of Shravasti to meet the Buddha Shakyamuni, who is attracting a large following with his new teachings. Siddhartha is impressed by the Buddha's charisma and the good sense in his preaching, but he decides not to become a disciple. Instead he travels on alone to a city, where he studies the art of love with the city's most expert courtesan, and he apprentices himself to a wealthy merchant. He masters both the art of love and that of making money. Eventually, however, he immerses himself too fully in the dissipations of the city, in gambling and intoxication, until he reaches an intolerable state of self-disgust. Finally he escapes the city, wanders about aimlessly, and very nearly commits suicide by throwing himself into a river.

In the end, Siddhartha settles on the bank of this same river and becomes a ferryman. And there, listening closely to the river, he ultimately attains what he has sought all along. "In this hour," Hesse writes, "Siddhartha ceased to do battle with fate, ceased to suffer. Upon his face blossomed the gaiety of knowledge that is no longer opposed by any will, that knows perfection, that is in agreement with the river of occurrences, with the current of life, full of empathy, full of fellow feeling, given over to the current, part of the Oneness."[3]

In his romantic novel of ideas and an individual's spiritual quest, Hermann Hesse composed a compelling portrait of ancient north India for an early-twentieth-century German readership wearied and devastated by defeat in World War I. Hesse certainly saw Siddhartha's voyage of renunciations and self-discovery as relevant to his own time, and he later wrote that he had attempted in *Siddhartha* to "express my beliefs in a book."[4] No doubt the novel's ancient Indian setting allowed Hesse and his readers a welcome sense of distance, an escape into a seemingly more placid world, at the same time that it enabled the author to address his recurrent issues of the individual in tension with social norms and expectations. Siddhartha's quest in old India has continued to speak to modern audiences in the West. After the novel was translated into English in 1951, the Grove Press edition with its evocative black-and-white seated Buddha on the cover become a cult classic among counterculture readers in the 1960s, including myself, and the novel has since become a staple in American high school literature courses.

The world in which Hesse situated his fictional seeker was indeed one of debate and innovation, in which the questioning of old faiths, the articulating of new goals, and the seeking of something unchanging within or beyond the transitory, fickle, disappointing world of ordinary life were not uncommon. Siddhartha had many real-life counterparts in the India of the sixth century BCE. But in addition to intellectual ferment and spiritual pursuit, it was also a time of great social transitions in South Asia. Cities and a new urban culture reemerged in South Asia during the period between 600 BCE and 300 BCE. Along with the rise of cities, other immense transformations were taking place in social organization and economic practices. Technological and agricultural advances supported a rapidly growing population and created surplus wealth, which allowed more long-distance trade. Intense political rivalries among kings, whose fortified capitals grew into cities, led to wars in which larger monarchies established their authority over ever-greater territories. These developments in northern India provided the social setting within which radically new conceptions of the good life could be advanced and advocated. These new visions, recorded and transmitted in the teachings of the Upanishadic sages and the texts of the early Buddhists and the Jains, would have profound effects in South Asia for many centuries to come, and beyond South Asia as well.

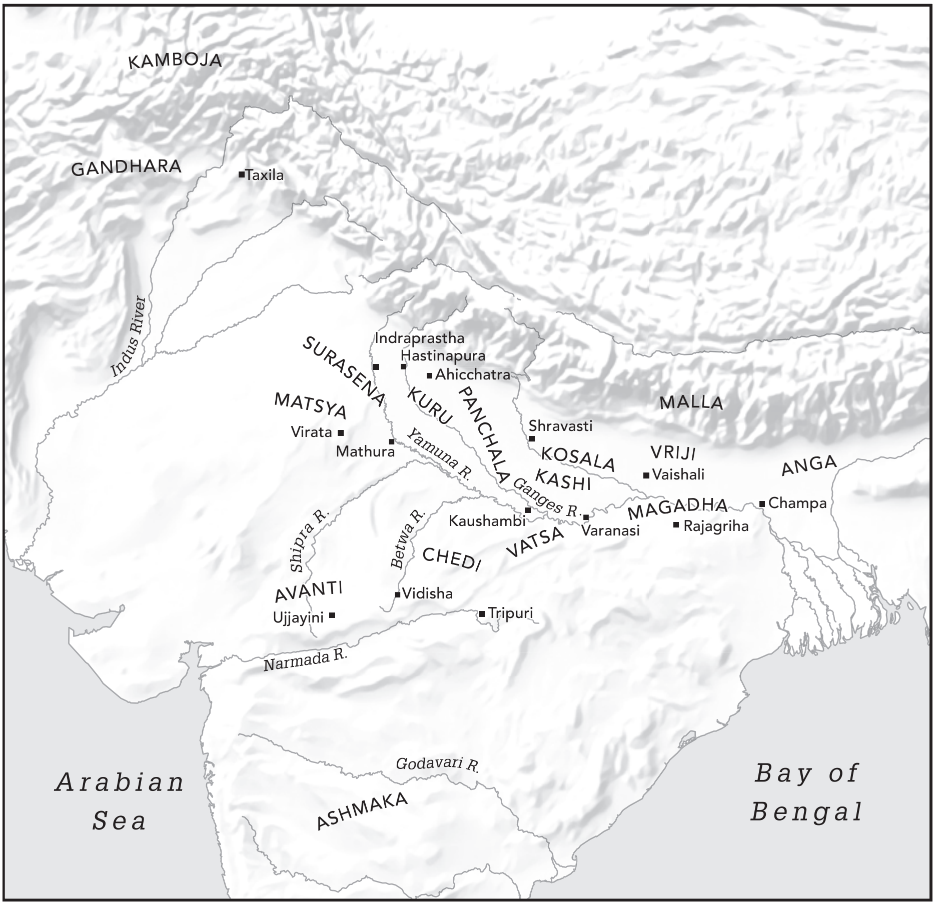
The Changing Social World of Northern India

The center of cultural change for this period lies farther east and downstream from the locus of the Vedic world. The central Gangetic plains extend from the Doab, the land between the Yamuna and Ganges rivers, to the Bengal area, some six hundred miles of flat alluvial plains. Nowadays, a train ride or drive from Lucknow east toward Kolkata takes one past mile after unrelieved mile of cultivated fields, but originally the Gangetic landscape was covered in savanna forest. The process of clearing the forests had already begun by late Vedic times, and small agricultural villages had taken root along the river banks. This laid the groundwork for a dramatic expansion of the population in the region between 600 and 300 BCE.

In the Vedic period there were just two categories of settlements in the Gangetic plains: small agricultural villages and small towns. Starting around 600 BCE, archeologists are able to discern four types of communities, forming a hierarchy of settlements.[5] The smallest are the villages, devoted entirely to agriculture and herding. Somewhat larger settlements form minor centers, where there are signs of some craft and manufacturing production, and probably activities of marketing and revenue-collection took place. Further up the hierarchy are towns. In the towns, production of luxury goods such as jewelry was common, and the towns also served various administrative functions. Finally, at the top of the scale of settlements is the city, fortified urban centers like Kaushambi and Shravasti. These acted as the political capitals of their regions.

New settlements, particularly those away from the river edges, required clearing of the forest. No doubt this was accomplished most often by fire, a rapid and efficient method, much as Arjuna and Krishna cleared the Khandava Forest as the site for Indraprastha, in the *Mahabharata*'s account. But the introduction of iron implements for chopping and plowing must have greatly facilitated the process of bringing the Gangetic landscape under cultivation. In the riverine plains, agriculture by this period was becoming diverse and highly productive. The vocabulary in Panini's grammar, composed around 500 BCE, reflects the centrality of agriculture in the economy of his time. Panini mentions many agrarian tasks in crop cultivation, such as plowing, sowing, reaping, threshing, and winnowing.[6] The rich lexicon of crop names likewise points to a variegated agricultural harvest. Panini speaks of several different varieties of rice, barley, mung beans, masa dal, sesamum, horse gram, sugarcane, and coriander, as well as plants cultivated for cloth dyes and fibers. Fruit trees like mango, bilva, and pomegranate also appear. The fertile virgin soil of the alluvial Gangetic plains—still producing good crops over 2,500 years later—produced abundant yields, and the climate allowed cultivators to raise two crops a year. The cultivation of rice using irrigation, introduced during this period, was particularly fruitful. Agriculture had advanced beyond subsistence levels, which enabled it to support a growing population.

Surplus agricultural production allows a greater division of labor. Some persons may be freed altogether from the agrarian round of labor in order to specialize in other productive tasks. Here again Panini's vocabulary of terms gives some idea of the range of craft activities practiced during his time. He mentions the following: potters, carpenters, bow makers, cloth dyers, miners, weavers, blanket makers, leather workers, blacksmiths, goldsmiths, and scaffold makers.[7] Early Buddhist texts likewise mention a great many artisan occupations, including reed workers, vehicle makers, needle makers, ivory carvers, garland makers, and silk weavers. Surplus crops and crafts must be transported and redistributed to reach other consumers, and accordingly a new class of traders also emerged during this period. New technologies of trade, namely writing and coinage, facilitated the growth of exchange between villages and larger settlements. Thus we see, in the peasant villages and smaller towns of the Gangetic plains in this period, a productive agrarian society with a growing specialization of skill and artisanship, with increasing trade, knowledge of money, and an emerging disparity of wealth among its inhabitants.[8]



MAP 7. Kingdoms and Cities at the Time of the Buddha

For a history of Indic religious cultures, the most important settlements in the hierarchy are the cities, urban settlements with populations of thirty thousand or more. Urban civilization reemerges in South Asia a millennium or so after the end of the Indus Valley cities, again centered on a river and its basin. This time, however, the primary waterway is not the Indus, but the Ganges. By the time of the Buddha in the fifth century there were several fortified cities in the central Gangetic plains: Kaushambi, Rajagriha, Shravasti, Champa, and Rajghat, as well as Atranjikhera farther west on the Ganges, and Ujjayini to the south. Other cities added fortifications within a century or two, including Vidisha, Mathura, Tripuri, Vaishali, and Pataliputra (**Map 7**). Judging from the extent of their physical remains, archeologists estimate that the populations of these urban settlements ranged from thirty thousand to sixty thousand. The construction of the fortifications for these cities was itself a massive project. At Kaushambi, the thirty-foot-high ramparts ran for some four miles.[9] Other than impressive ramparts, however, there are few if any signs of central planning, nor is there any evidence that monumental public or religious edifices formed the nuclei of the new South Asian cities in this early period. This differs from the more fully planned, more centralized urban formations of the earlier Indus Valley.[10]

As with the civilization of the Indus Valley, urban culture depends on certain prerequisites, such as a stable agricultural system capable of producing beyond subsistence levels, and it also engenders new cultural developments. Cities facilitated the development of new craft specializations, and they especially promoted the role of trade and a new merchant class. Fundamental technologies of trade, such as writing and coins, reappeared in South Asia along with the rise of the new urban culture. Panini refers to scribes, and archeologists postulate that script was introduced during this period in the context of mercantile exchanges.[11] Punch-marked coins had gained wide distribution through the Gangetic plains by 400 BCE, which indicates the beginnings of a monetized trade system. Trade included both local exchanges linking villages to towns and cities within the same region, and also increasingly long-distance trade in raw materials and luxury goods. The early Buddhist texts speak of lengthy caravans of bullock-pulled carts moving through northern India, from northwest centers like Taxila down the Gangetic plains as far east as Champa. Buddhist texts also refer to wealthy urban-based merchant householders, a new elite group distinct from both Brahmins and rulers, who would play an important cultural role in the rise of the Buddhist and Jain orders.

Urbanization was also linked to transformations in social structure and political organization during this period. While villages were occupied by extended kin groups, where communities were bound together by shared descent and customary practices, the new cities brought together much more heterogeneous congregations of people. In such settings, identities and loyalties may become more flexible. In small face-to-face villages loyalty to family and clan may be foremost; in cities one might show loyalty to an occupational group or to the ruling king.

While the cities were centers of trade, they also formed political centers. The largest urban settlements were also capitals of kingdoms. We have seen that new concepts of kingship as religiously consecrated sovereignty over a territorial domain had already been introduced in the late Vedic period and enacted in the more elaborate Vedic rituals of Rajasuya and Ashvamedha. During the period of new urban culture, kings mobilized still greater resources to increase their territories. War was no longer primarily about plundering movable resources, like the Indo-Aryan cattle raids, but about defeating rivals and expanding one's domain. It was a time of intense political rivalries, and the central Gangetic plains with its productive land and its river-based trade were the prize over which the most ambitious rulers competed. Early Buddhist texts speak of sixteen *mahajanapadas*, large territories spread throughout northern India. Gradually, the more powerful of these kingdoms swallowed up the lesser ones, in a process Indian political theory calls *matsyanyaya*, the "rule of the fishes." (The closest American equivalent is "dog eat dog," or perhaps the "law of the jungle.") By the fifth century BCE there were just four fish in the Gangetic waters: Avanti with its capital at Ujjayini, Vatsa centered at Kaushambi, Kosala with Shravasti as capital, and Magadha whose capital was Rajagriha.

During the lifetime of the Buddha, Magadha became the most powerful of all Indian kingdoms. Bimbisara was anointed king of Magadha sometime in the late sixth century BCE (c. 540 BCE). He soon formed a marriage alliance with Kosala and conquered the smaller kingdom of Anga to his east. This secured for Magadha control over much of the lower Ganges, with its extensive river trade. Bimbisara also began to create a new administrative structure for his kingdom. He appointed officers to survey village lands within the kingdom and to evaluate the crops. What had once been seen as tribute (*bali*) haphazardly expropriated by a chieftain now was reconceived as taxes (*bali*, redefined) on land or a share (*bhoga*) of its produce considered due to the state. The more assured system of extracting revenue from the productive lands of the central Gangetic plains certainly provided Magadha an economic advantage over its rivals, and this new administrative structure laid the foundation for the land revenue systems that would support kings and kingdoms throughout Indian history. Bimbisara's ambitious son Ajatashatru murdered his father in 498 BCE and assumed the Magadha throne. He absorbed Kosala and the Kashi area around Rajghat (modern Varanasi) into his kingdom and thereby extended Magadha rule over the entire central Gangetic region. To help ensure control over the Ganges river trade, Ajatashatru fortified the river port of Pataligrama, later renamed Pataliputra (modern Patna), which in a century or two would grow into the largest city in South Asia. Ajatashatru's only remaining opponent in the area was a confederation of smaller oligarchies north of the Ganges, known as the Vajji confederation. A protracted war between the Vajjis and Magadha ended finally in Ajatashatru's victory and the dominance of Magadha at the center of northern India in the fifth century BCE. This would form the basis for the first great Indian empire in the next two centuries.

The new urban culture of this period provided the social foundation for its most significant new ideological developments. As Patrick Olivelle and others have observed, the city is the principal location for the "discovery of the individual" as a central religious concern.[12] With the decrease of family and kin networks and identifications in an urban setting, a more individualistic spirit can emerge. And so, in this period of social transformation, we observe radical new ideas of the good life. These new ideas were not centered around the maintenance of cosmic and societal order, but around the individual quest for some kind of transcendent state of being.

In the new ideologies, the Brahmin householder is no longer the exemplar of the best way of life. Rather, figures like the fictional Siddhartha become models. Urban-based Brahmin teachers like Yajnavalkya (in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*) and Angiras (in the *Mundaka Upanishad*) articulate new ways to envision the underlying structure of the world and the most valuable human goals. A division appears within the Brahmin class during this period, with "village Brahmins" largely remaining loyal to the earlier Vedic ideals of the Brahmin householder, and urbanized Brahmins of the cities avidly exploring new intellectual currents.[13] Mendicant ascetics and yogis, generally called "Shramanas," abandoned social life and experimented with various forms of self-control, bodily austerities, and meditation to explore inner experiential states. Some of the most successful Shramana teachers, like Mahavira Vardhamana and the Buddha Shakyamuni, established new voluntary communities of followers to pass on their teachings, to offer structured training in their meditative techniques, and to allow the most accomplished disciples to gain a state of liberation or salvation from the sufferings of the world.

Perhaps the earliest teacher to expound a new vision of the good life is Yajnavalkya, the audacious Brahmin teacher who sets forth his ideas in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad.*

Yajnavalkya's Integrative Vision

Yajnavalkya's teachings appear in the form of a narrative, related in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad.* The story takes place in Videha, at the northern edge of the central Gangetic plains, and involves the local ruler Janaka, Yajnavalkya, and a host of Brahmins and other learned folk who have assembled for a large-scale public sacrifice.

> King Janaka of Videha once performed a public sacrifice, with ample gifts for the priests. Brahmins from the far Kuru and Panchala kingdoms came and gathered there. Janaka wanted to know who among these Brahmins was the best versed in the Vedas. So he corralled a thousand cows, and each cow had ten pieces of gold tied to its horns. (BAU 3.1.1)

Immediately the narrator establishes the essentials of the scene: a large public sacrifice, a generous king as patron, Brahmins flocking hundreds of miles from the old center of Vedic culture to participate, and a competition to determine the most knowledgeable among them all. King Janaka issues a challenge: whoever is most learned may take possession of the cows and their gold-tasseled horns. At first the Brahmins hold back. No one is willing to take on the claim to be most learned. Yajnavalkya, however, is not intimidated. He orders his student to go ahead and claim the cows. Naturally the other Brahmins are enraged. How dare he make such an audacious affirmation of his own learning among all of them? They set out to stump him and recover Janaka's prize for themselves.

Yajnavalkya must present his vision, then, not as a systematic exposition, but through a series of argumentative dialogues with skeptical opponents. It is a brahmodya, a Vedic philosophical disputation, and the contestants view it as a battle. When the female disputant Gargi Vachaknavi takes her turn to question Yajnavalkya, she announces, "I challenge you, Yajnavalkya. Just as a fierce young warrior from Kashi or Videha might string his loosened bow, take up two deadly arrows in his hand, and advance to meet his opponent, so, too, I advance with two questions. Answer them for me!" (BAU 3.8.2) The stakes are high. Not just cows and gold, but also status and even life itself may be at risk. When Gargi's challenges probe too far, Yajnavalkya warns her not to go any further. "Don't ask too many questions, Gargi, or your head will shatter apart." He is not exaggerating, either. After another lengthy and contentious exchange, Vidagdha Sakalya's head actually does shatter. This seems to chasten Yajnavalkya's opponents. After Sakalya's demise no one else is courageous enough to challenge the victor.

Considering the setting in which Yajnavalkya presents his vision, it is not surprising that many of his ideas seem to grow directly out of Vedic sacrificial speculation. He follows the discursive paths set by older interpretive works like the *Shatapatha Brahmana*, and this helps make his ideas persuasive to his Brahmin interlocutors. What emerges, however, is an integrated set of new presuppositions about the fundamental nature of things that is not found in any earlier Vedic text. These presuppositions would provide the shared foundation for many of the central religious and cultural debates of the period.

One key idea for Yajnavalkya is that of transmigration, or repeated "rebirth" (*purvajanman*). No one likes to accept death as a final annihilation, and so a basic question that religious thinkers and theologians everywhere have grappled with is, what happens to a person after death? In India, the earlier Vedic texts had generally accepted that a person continued to lead a bodily existence in some other domain, and they proposed several alternative worlds in which this might take place. There was a world of "fathers" (*pitri*) where deceased ancestors were maintained by the living through monthly sacrificial offerings; there was a world of the gods in heaven (*svarga*); and there was an underground world of the dead ruled by the god Yama. Yajnavalkya does not overturn these ideas; rather, he offers a more comprehensive eschatology that includes those worlds.

Yajnavalkya apparently considers his view of rebirth to be controversial. At first, when the interlocutor Jaratkarava Artabhaga questions him about life after death, Yajnavalkya refuses to answer in public and insists on explaining his new idea to Artabhaga in private. Later, in a more secluded conversation with King Janaka, Yajnavalkya is more forthcoming. At the close of one's life, he says, the self passes to a new body. "It's like this," he explains. "Just as a caterpillar, when it reaches the tip of a blade of grass, it steps out for another foothold and draws it to itself, so, too, this self (*atman*), when it comes to the end of its body, makes it unconscious, steps out for another foothold, and draws it to itself" (BAU 4.4.3). The self discards its dead body as a snake sloughs its skin, and the self that once animated that body moves into a new one to begin a new corporeal life. It may be that of an ancestor, says Yajnavalkya, or a semidivine Gandharva, a god, Prajapati, *brahman*, or some other being.

Yajnavalkya's caterpillar analogy for transmigration leads naturally to another question: What, then, determines the next blade of grass, the next bodily form that a self occupies? Surely one doesn't simply choose the nearest body, as a caterpillar reaches out for an adjacent blade of grass. In his private conversation with Artabhaga, Yajnavalkya identifies the decisive principle as *karman*, action. As the narrator reports of their off-stage dialogue, "They talked about nothing but action" (BAU 3.2.13). The term "karman," from the root *kri* (to do, to make), refers to all actions, but in earlier Vedic usage karman denotes ritual or sacrificial actions. As we have seen, in the Vedic sacrificial worldview, all ritual actions have consequences or fruits (*phala*). Correct ritual acts bear good fruit, while sacrificial errors must be corrected or expiated, lest they lead to unhappy results. Yajnavalkya broadens the usage of karman here to include the moral quality of all action. "As one acts and conducts oneself," he explains to King Janaka, "so one comes to be. If one does good actions, one becomes good. If one does bad actions, one becomes bad. It is by good actions (karman) that one becomes good, and by bad actions one becomes bad" (BAU 4.4.5). The moral character of a person's actions has a bearing on that person not only in the current life, but also in future lives.

Yajnavalkya's transmigratory theory suggests another new concept, *samsara*. This term denotes cyclical phenomena, and the earlier Vedic worldview was certainly conversant with the cycles of nature. Much of the sacrificial schedule was tuned to cyclical transitions. With the idea of transmigration, however, the term could take on a new meaning. A person's life cycle becomes just one rotation in a much longer cycle of that self's death and rebirth and death again. Samsara conveys the prospect of repeated wandering through a succession of bodies and worlds. This applies not just to humans, but to all corporeal beings. The gods, too, exist within the circuit of samsara, for they also have life cycles and ultimately must move on to new bodies.

Such endless wandering can appear as a bleak prospect indeed. At several points Yajnavalkya declares, "All besides this is grief." The world of unending transmigration may be one of unending sorrow, but Yajnavalkya alludes here to another eschatological possibility as well. What does he mean by the "this" that is not grief? Yajnavalkya refers to this alternative to samsara as the "world of *brahman*" (*brahmaloka*). Later texts most often use the term *moksha* or "liberation" for the possibility of ultimate escape from rebirth. If normal transmigratory life is full of grief, the world of *brahman* is filled with bliss (*ananda*). To convey to King Janaka just how much bliss is involved here, Yajnavalkya advances a scale of forms. "Among humans," he begins, "if one is accomplished and prosperous, rules over others, and fully enjoys all the best human pleasures, that is the highest bliss for humans" (BAU 4.3.33). As a successful and wealthy human ruler, Janaka might know something about this human bliss. But that is nothing in comparison to other forms of bliss, Yajnavalkya asserts.

> Now, a hundred measures of that human bliss is equal to one of the bliss of ancestors who have won heaven. A hundred measures of the ancestors' bliss in heaven is equal to one that the Gandharvas enjoy in their world. A hundred measures of bliss in the Gandharva world is equal to one enjoyed by those who have become divine through ritual action. (BAU 4.3.33)

And so on, he continues in ascending multiples of bliss, with gods-by-birth, Prajapati, and, finally, the world of *brahman*. The world of *brahman* is the place of highest bliss; in Yajnavalkya's estimate, it is one quadrillion times the highest bliss of the most fortunate human person.

Once again Yajnavalkya uses and redefines a term from the earlier Vedic tradition to present a new concept. As we have seen, the neuter noun *brahman* previously referred to the sacred word of the Veda, the mantra, seen as an efficacious and powerful force. The word appears to be hotly contested in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*. In one discussion King Janaka tells Yajnavalkya all the different new definitions of the *brahman* he has heard from other teachers. One identifies the *brahman* as speech, another as breath, still others as sight, hearing, mind, and heart. Yajnavalkya dismisses each of these as inadequate; "one-legged *brahmans*," he calls them. In his teachings, Yajnavalkya presents the *brahman* as a kind of transcendent reality higher than any god, even the creator god Prajapati. Yet he is also wary of characterizing it, lest he be trapped in a wobbly definition of his own. Similarly with the inner self, the *atman*, Yajnavalkya gives the classic apophatic definition: *neti neti* ("not this, not that"). "As for the atman, one can only say, 'It is not this, it is not that.' It is ungraspable, since one cannot grasp it. It is indestructible, since it is never destroyed. It is unattached, since it does not attach to anything. It is unbound. It is not agitated. It is not injured" (BAU 4.4.7). Whatever one might positively assert of this transcendent reality, Yajnavalkya would deny. Yet paradoxically he insists on placing it at the very center of everything.

How might one reach this world of *brahman*? Yajnavalkya does not set out a systematic plan, but he does suggest a place to start. Desire (*kama*), he says, is at the root of the problem. From desire comes intention, from intention comes action, and action leads only to more becoming. One who can banish desires may attain *brahman*. Yajnavalkya quotes a verse in support.

> When one renounces all the desires that lie in the heart,
> Right then that mortal becomes immortal,
> And reaches *brahman* in this world.
> (BAU 4.4.7)

Giving up desires is easier said than done, of course. But Yajnavalkya affirms that other beings in the past have successfully done so.

When one recognizes the *brahman*, he suggests, desires for other things may fall by the wayside.

> When they knew this, the wise men of old times no longer desired offspring. "What is the use of offspring," they reflected, "since the atman is ours and it is all the world. So they renounced the desire for sons, the desire for wealth, and the desire for the world, and they took up the mendicant life. The desire

> for sons is just like the desire for wealth. And the desire for wealth is just like the desire for the world—since they are both just desires." (BAU 4.4.22)

For Yajnavalkya a life of wandering and begging appears to be a natural outcome of giving up desires. And at the conclusion of his teachings, Yajnavalkya himself appears to take this step. He offers his final teachings to his inquisitive wife Maitreyi. "There," he then tells her, "I have given you the instruction." And off he goes.

The Upanishads in and beyond the Vedas

The *Brihadaranyaka*, where Yajnavalkya articulates his new integrative vision, is one of the earliest of a new genre of Vedic texts, the Upanishads. These are the most important of all texts for the historical development of Indian philosophy and theology. Like all Vedic texts, they were originally oral texts that were compiled and transmitted among Brahmin schools. The earliest Upanishads probably date from around or just before 600 BCE, while others were composed throughout the period of 600–300 BCE. In fact, writers continued to compose Upanishads for many centuries thereafter, as late as the sixteenth century CE, but the later texts are considered "minor" Upanishads. Indian commentators and Western scholars have directed their greatest attention to a small group of ten or thirteen "principal" Upanishads, which are also the earliest compositions of the genre.

The early Upanishads constitute a rich and varied body of speculative literature. Some portions take the form of philosophical disputations or brahmodyas, like the debate Janaka sponsored at Videha. Other sections consist of less contentious teaching sessions, where respected thinkers present their ideas to receptive students. There are stories of encounters with death, philosophical discussions among gods, and poems filled with striking metaphors, brilliant images, paradoxes, and mystifying pronouncements. The Upanishads include the diverse teachings of noteworthy thinkers of the period—mostly those of Brahmins, but also those of kings or Kshatriyas. So King Janaka of Videha, who appears in the Yajnavalkya session as a patron of Vedic debate and an eager student, elsewhere presents his own ideas on the sacrifice, and King Pravahana Jaivali claims that the doctrine he promulgates has never reached the ears of Brahmins. There are powerful female debaters like Gargi Vachaknavi. These early Indian speculative philosophers were part of the new urban culture. As translator Patrick Olivelle observes, the social background of the Upanishadic teachers "consists of court and craft, rather than village and agriculture."[14]

As a genre of texts the Upanishads constitute the fourth and final main strata of the Vedic corpus. Each individual Upanishad is attached to a particular Vedic shakha. In later Vedic tradition, it became conventional to consider the Upanishads as the *jnanakanda*, or "knowledge portion," of the Veda, as distinct from the earlier parts of the Veda identified as the *karmakanda* or "sacrificial portion." Another traditional view holds that the Upanishads constitute the *Vedanta*, the "end of the Veda." Some interpret this simply as indicating that the Upanishads form the final set of works included in the Veda, but others believe it implies that the Upanishads convey in some sense the culmination or ultimate teachings of the Veda. Taking the latter view, later schools of orthodox Hindu philosophy would call themselves Vedanta and take the principal Upanishads collectively as one of three fundamental textual sources for their philosophical positions.

Western scholars have sometimes tried to distill from the multiple teachings a single "doctrine of the Upanishads." However, it is more appropriate to allow for their diversity, their intellectual fertility, and even their resistance to any singular interpretation. As Joel Brereton observes, the Upanishads "are not catechisms of direct answers to religious questions, which obviate the need for any further reflection. Rather, they stimulate thought and challenge interpretation."[15] Yet the Upanishadic thinkers do share a broad agenda. All of them seek, in varied ways, to articulate and to convey to others an "integrative vision," as Brereton writes.

> In general, each Upanishadic teaching creates an integrative vision, a view of the whole which draws together the separate elements of the world and of human experiences and compresses them into a single form. To one who has this larger vision of things, the world is not a set of diverse and disorganized objects and living beings, but rather forms a totality with a distinct shape and character.[16]

As with Yajnavalkya, many of the Upanishadic teachings grow out of earlier Vedic discourse and practice, but they move in a new direction. Accordingly, Upanishadic teachers sometimes exhibit a critical edge toward the older tradition. The existing Vedic tradition, they suggest, is not adequate to the more comprehensive understanding they seek. A good example of this may be seen in the instruction that Uddalaka Aruni, a Brahmin of the Kuru-Panchala region, offers to his son Shvetaketu in the *Chandogya Upanishad*. Shvetaketu spends twelve years as a Vedic *brahmacharin*, learns all the Vedas, and returns to his father's home at age twenty-four with a swollen head, stubborn and considering himself learned. Uddalaka greets his returning son with a challenge. With all his

Vedic learning, Shvetaketu must surely have learned the “rule of substitution.” What is this rule? It is a principle, Uddalaka explains, “by which one hears what he has not heard, one thinks what he has not thought, and one realizes what he has not realized before” (ChU 6.1.3). As Uddalaka sees it, the rule of substitution is a means of going beyond a perception of the diversity of empirical reality to recognize a more fundamental and unitary underlying reality. Shvetaketu is forced to admit that, in twelve years of Vedic education, none of his teachers have revealed this valuable method to him.

What follows is a masterful demonstration of ancient Indian pedagogy, in which Uddalaka seeks to push his son toward a full realization of the absolute reality, which Uddalaka simply terms *sat*, the Existent or Being. He begins with an origin story, quite different from earlier Vedic narratives of genesis, and then shows how human beings are composed of the same basic constituents as the universe. Being is the source of the world and, at the same time, the source of our bodies and our minds. But Uddalaka is not satisfied with a single formulation of this notion. To convey the full dimensions of this realization to his swellheaded son, Uddalaka resorts to metaphors, analogies, parables, and experiments. He has Shvetaketu dissolve salt in water to demonstrate the ubiquity and imperceptibility of Being, and he asks him to cut apart the seed of a tree to show its subtlety and fecundity. “This most subtle essence,” says Uddalaka, “is the inner self of the entire world. It is the True. It is the atman. And you, Shvetaketu, are also that” (ChU 6.8.7). Uddalaka conveys to his son, and to all who read this text, the fuller dimensions of Being. It is the source of everything, and its destination. And we are each of us one with that underlying oneness.

Uddalaka presents his integrative vision as a kind of advanced placement course that goes beyond anything found in the conventional curriculum. The older Vedic teachings do not lead to the broader and more penetrating kind of realization that his son should seek. In the somewhat later *Mundaka Upanishad*, the teacher Angiras takes Uddalaka’s implicit critique of the Veda a step further.

At the onset of the *Mundaka*, a wealthy householder named Shaunaka approaches Angiras and poses the big question: “What is it that, when one knows it, one can know the entire world?” (MU 1.1.3) Better off than Shvetaketu after his Vedic education, at least Shaunaka recognizes that there must be a key to all knowledge, a most basic and comprehensive insight that unlocks everything else. He just doesn’t know what it is. Angiras begins by drawing a distinction between two forms of knowledge, a lower and a higher. The lower knowledge consists of the *Rig Veda*, the *Yajur Veda*, the *Sama Veda*, the *Atharva Veda*, phonetics, the ritual sciences, grammar, etymology, metrics, and astronomy—that is, the four Vedas and the six Vedangas, the basic conventional Vedic curriculum. On the other side of the balance, the higher knowledge is simply "that by which one attains the Imperishable" (MU 1.1.5). On Angiras's scale, as one may guess, comprehending the Imperishable (*avyaya*) will certainly outweigh all the massive learning contained in the Vedic corpus.

Angiras urges his pupil to aim at attaining a realization of the Imperishable.

> Take as your bow the great weapon of the Upanishad,
> Fix on it the sharp arrow of homage,
> Stretch your bowstring with your mind focused on its essence.
> The Imperishable is certainly your target, my friend, so aim at that!
> (MU 2.2.3)

As Angiras suggests, his own teaching contained in this Upanishad can help launch one toward the goal, but it is not sufficient in itself. One who aspires to this highest target must realize it profoundly within one's own thought. It is a matter of knowledge and, ultimately, of self-identification with the Imperishable. "When one knows the highest *brahman*," Angiras concludes, "one becomes that *brahman* . . . One crosses beyond sorrow, one crosses beyond misfortune. Freed from the knots of the heart, one becomes immortal" (MU 3.2.9).

Angiras harshly criticizes those who depend solely on performance of Vedic rites. They are deluded in their quest, he argues, like blind leading the blind.

> Sacrificial action offers false hope.
> Dwelling in ignorance, many times over,
> These fools think, "We have reached our goal!"
> But those devoted to rites never understand, due to their passion,
> And so they fall from their miserable worlds, suffering.
> (MU 1.2.9)

Performing rites (karman) may lead to worldly aims and even to a stay in heaven, Angiras concedes, but it does not lead beyond that, to an escape from the cycle of transmigration, and so those who possess only the lower form of knowledge must return, again and again, to this abject world.

Angiras juxtaposes the life of a Vedic sacrificer, which he considers ultimately fruitless, with another style of life.

> Those who live in the forest, in austerities and faith,
> Peaceful and wise, begging for their food—
> Free of passion, they pass through the door of the sun
> To the place of the immortal Purusha, the Imperishable, atman.
> (MU 1.2.11)

Angiras praises ascetic practices (*tapas*) as the means by which one may come to know the Imperishable.

Collectively the early Upanishads advance a new understanding of worldly existence as a source of dissatisfaction, and they present various formulations both for understanding this predicament and for moving beyond it. Their totalizing visions generally assume that some sort of personal transcendence is possible for humans, and most often Upanishadic teachers like Yajnavalkya and Uddalaka Aruni attempt to convey this possibility as a matter of unifying knowledge (*jnana*) or recognition of primordial unity. Yet along with intellectual methods, many agree with Angiras that some fundamental renunciation of ordinary life may be necessary to attaining this desirable liberation.

Wanderers on the Edge of Society

Yajnavalkya's teachings in *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* conclude with the recommendation that one who aspires to gain the world of *brahman* should leave behind the life of a householder and take up an entirely different mode of life, that of a homeless mendicant. At the end of his instruction to his wife Maitreyi, evidently he follows his own advice and leaves her and his other wife Katyayani to become a forest dweller. Similarly, Angiras praises the life of the beggar in the wilderness to his pupil, the householder Shaunaka, though there is no indication Shaunaka actually takes Angiras's advice. For these Upanishadic teachers, renunciation of one's familial and social obligations is a necessary step in any effort to gain what Angiras calls the Imperishable. They were not the only ones during this period in northern India who thought so. By all indications, there were many seekers who walked away from the urbanizing society around them onto a path leading, they hoped, to a transformation of life. The most common term for the seekers like this, in texts of this period, is Shramana, those who "make an effort" toward salvation. Scholars have sometimes used the phrase "Shramana movement" to designate those wanderers in search of Being.

Who were the Shramanas? What did they believe and what did they do? The word points to a new type of religious specialist, distinct from the conventional Brahmins who recited the Vedas and performed sacrifices. Some texts pair the terms *brahmana-shramana* as the two primary categories of religious vocations in northern India of the time. But the Shramanas were not a unitary group at all, as a "Shramana movement" might suggest. Rather, they subscribed to many different viewpoints and adopted disparate forms of practice. Sometimes they are referred to as *parivrajakas*, "those who wander about," and elsewhere they are called *bhikshus*, mendicants or beggars. These terms point to the most common characteristics of Shramanas: they have wandered forth from ordinary society, they subsist by begging, and they direct their effort toward some transcendent goal.

Shramanas as Social Beings

To renounce social life and become a Shramana requires an individual choice. One is not born a renouncer, as one may be born a Brahmin. Renunciation is an intentional act. In one of the earliest Buddhist texts, the *Sutta Nipata*, the Buddha Shakyamuni states the reason for his own renunciation: "Living in a house is crowded, a place full of dust and dirt. But the life of the ascetic is free, in the open air. And when he realized this, he left his home" (SN 3.1.2). The Buddha recognizes the emotional encumbrances entailed in living within a family and a society. "The attachment toward children and wives is like a bamboo clump thickly grown and entangled," he observes. Just as the Upanishadic teachers, the Shramanas view the inevitable attachments and desires of life in a family and a society as an impediment to a pure life. By contrast, they portray the life of a homeless wanderer as free and noble, like "an unbound deer wandering in the forest" or a "great spotted elephant leaving its herd and going about in the forest to his heart's content" (SN 1.3.5, 19), Live alone, advises the Buddha, like a "rhinoceros horn."

Leaving one's everyday life and taking on the new one of a Shramana was a momentous personal act, and renunciatory communities developed rites of passage to mark the occasion. These rites involved three primary steps. First came acts of abandonment denoting that one was leaving behind one's former life. Clothing and personal possessions were given away. Brahmin renouncers might remove the sacrificial thread of their previous Vedic initiation and abandon the sacrificial fires they had diligently maintained as householders. Buddhist renouncers shaved their heads while Jain initiates more forcefully pulled out their hair by its roots. Second was some public declaration of intention, to mark the serious aim of this passage into a new way of life. The third step was for the new renouncer to take on the central accoutrements or signs of the renunciatory life: simple robe or loincloth, begging bowl, walking staff, and the like. The initiate might receive a new name as well, as final recognition of the change of identity involved in this act of renunciation.

One who leaves family and home to seek some form of religious attainment, however defined, does so on his or her own behalf. It is an individual goal that is pursued through individual effort. The break with ordinary social life and the personal quest of the Shramana have led some, like sociologist Louis Dumont, to see the Indian renouncer as a Western-style "individual" as distinct from the more characteristically Indian "man-in-the-world." For Dumont, the Vedic Brahmin priest, engaged in religious activities on behalf of family, society, and the cosmos as a whole, exemplifies the Indian man-in-the-world. By contrast, Dumont says of the Indian renouncer, "He thinks as an individual, and this is the distinctive trait which opposes him to the man-in-the-world and brings him closer to the western thinker."[17]

However, we should not accept the Buddha's hermetic imagery or Dumont's dichotomy too literally. "No man is an island," said the poet John Donne, and likewise no person is truly as autonomous as a rhinoceros horn. Early Indian renouncers, at least those of whom we have evidence, did not disappear deep into the Himalayas. They may have been termed "forest dwellers" (*vanaprastha*), but the "forest" was close at hand. The Gangetic plains were still underpopulated, and it was possible to leave home without going very far. As beggars, Shramanas remained materially dependent on others on a daily basis. They might have significantly reduced their desires, as the Upanishadic teachers recommended, but they retained a need for food and other minimal resources. Renouncers wandered for most of the year, but their wanderings mostly left them near the agricultural villages and cities where they could beg. Successful renouncers, too, might attract congregations of followers or disciples, and so they needed to stay close to settlements large enough to support numerous mendicants. In the earliest Buddhist texts, the Buddha Shakyamuni repeatedly delivers his teachings in or near the largest cities of his time: on Vulture Peak just outside Rajagriha, in the Jetavana park on the outskirts of Shravasti, in Jivaka's mango grove in the suburbs of Rajagriha, or in the Kukkutarama (Hen-house Hermitage) established outside Kaushambi by a prominent local banker.

The *Sutta Nipata* points to another reason beyond the material that many Shramanas hovered close to human settlements. Proximity to villages and cities, where the people were, allowed them to converse with others. The renouncers who appear in the texts of this period are not isolated self-absorbed seekers; they are eager to discuss and promulgate their ideas. A defining feature of all these texts—Upanishads, early Buddhist and Jain collections—is conversation, inquiry, and debate. Renouncers engage in discussions with Vedic Brahmins, with rural Brahmin landowners, urban merchant householders, kings and wealthy benefactors, earthly deities like unruly Yakshas, and each other. This is not a one-way conversation. Householders like Shaunaka and kings like Janaka appear in these texts as vitally interested in the experiences and teachings of the renouncers, and they make their own evaluations of them.

Even the gods took an interest in these discussions. The *Sutta Nipata* tells of one wandering Shramana, Sabhiya, who met up with a god. In a former life, the god had been Sabhiya's kinsman. As the story goes, the god gives Sabhiya a list of questions he should ask of any holy man. "If you find a Shramana or a Brahmin who can answer these questions you ask, then you should become a brahmacharin with him as your teacher," the god advises (SN 3.6). Sabhiya makes a pilgrimage to meet with the most esteemed teachers of the region and poses his questions to each of them. He sees, in succession, Purana Kassapa, Makkhali Gosala, Ajita Kesakambali, Pakuddha Kaccayana, Sanjaya Belatthiputta, and the Jain teacher Nataputta (or Mahavira), but none of them can answer his questions. Discouraged by their failures, Sabhiya nearly decides to renounce his renunciation and go back to easy living and a life of pleasure. Then he recalls one other young Shramana teacher, the Buddha Shakyamuni, who was staying at the Bamboo Grove just outside Rajagriha. Sabhiya asks all the same questions to the Buddha and (this being a Buddhist text) the Buddha answers them all masterfully. Sabhiya is thrilled, spontaneously praises the Buddha in ten eulogistic verses, and asks to become his follower.

The story of Sabhiya illustrates a key point: successful Shramanas attracted groups of followers or disciples who sought to transform their own lives along paths sketched out by the teachers. The Jaina texts narrate how Mahavira gained a following of disciples through his teachings, and the early Buddhist texts likewise stress how the Buddha Shakyamuni persuaded curious listeners to become followers. These Shramanas established new voluntary social groupings on the outskirts of everyday society, with shared commitments and codes of conduct. The followers of Mahavira would form the Jaina *gana* ("flock"), while the Buddha Shakyamuni's following became the Buddhist *sangha* ("assembly"). In addition to their shared disciplinary practices, these groups of fellow mendicants and followers would act as recitative communities by memorizing, collectively reciting, and transmitting the key teachings of the founders. We will return to the formation and structure of the important disciplinary orders of the Jaina gana and the Buddhist sangha in chapter 6.

Shramanas as Yogis

What did the Shramanas do when they left behind their families and society? In the quest for some kind of unconditioned or liberated state of being, it was a prerequisite to adopt a life of voluntary simplicity, but that in itself was not sufficient. Certainly they speculated and debated volubly, as the literature of this period indicates. Some renouncers evidently believed that attaining a correct insight into reality, a gnosis or *jñāna*, could be liberating. (Gnosis and jñāna share an Indo-European root **gno*, to know, also found in Latin-derived medical terms like diagnosis and prognosis.) However, in order to counteract the bonds of bodily and worldly life, others adopted new bodily practices, habits, or abstinences that we would consider forms of asceticism. These might involve abstaining from sexual intercourse, fasting or restricting food consumption, control of the breath, immobilizing the body, subjecting the body to extremes of heat or cold, placing the body in difficult postures, and controlling one's thought processes. The general aim was to reverse the course of the forces of corruption that lead to worldly bondage, thereby leading to a superior state. In early India several terms were used to denote such austerities (*tapas*, *tejas*, and *vrata*), but the most common and long-lived Indic term for these disciplinary practices is *yoga*.

The Sanskrit word yoga derives from an Indo-European root **yuj*, "to join," and it is used in the Vedas to denote the apparatus by which animals are harnessed or joined together. The English word "yoke" comes from the same root, as does the verb "join." In Vedic usage, yoga can also indicate the disciplined undertaking of an activity, as a person might "harness" himself to perform a sacrificial ritual. One could yoke oneself to battle. Several of the Upanishads, however, push the term yoga in a new direction. There it comes to convey the sense of an individual and voluntary adoption of bodily and mental disciplines, with the conviction that this self-restraint will have beneficial results. This is the sense in which yoga has been adopted into the English language, for a set of Indian-originated methods and exercises to achieve control of the body and the mind.

Scholars of Indian religions have long debated the origins of yoga. Some have argued that disciplinary practices of yoga developed orthogenetically within the Vedic tradition itself. Jan Heesterman, for example, postulates that the seed of yoga can be found in the voluntary self-restraints of the one who is initiated for the performance of a Vedic *Shrauta* sacrifice. Others like Geoffrey Samuel have sought to locate it outside the Vedic tradition, in the postulated shamanistic traditions of the pre-Aryan indigenous communities, or in the older Indus Valley civilization. Still others have argued that the practices of renunciation and yoga appear as a new and innovative ideology, distinct from all preexisting religious traditions.[18] Whatever the sources might have been, the Shramanas and other religious seekers of northern India during this period experimented with a wide variety of psycho-physical techniques in their efforts to attain their spiritual goals.

The life of the Buddha Shakyamuni serves as a good illustration of the Shramana practices of the period and of the experimental attitude of seekers. After he decided to become a renouncer, he recalls, he sought out other Shramanas who could instruct him in their ascetic practices. Wandering ascetics might well try out several regimens and study with several teachers in their pursuit of a successful path. Finally, the Buddha recognized that the methods of his teachers were not satisfactory, and he set off on his own to achieve enlightenment.

Practices of meditation (*dhyana*, *samadhi*) formed a central part of the yogic repertoire. The *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* offers one of the world's earliest instructional guides to meditation. First, one should select a good location, "level and clean, free of gravel, fire, and sand, near noiseless running waters and the like." Then one brings body, breath, senses, and mind under disciplined control.

> Sitting with body straight, its three sections upright, withdrawing the senses and the mind into the heart, a wise person may cross all the fearful rivers (of samsara) with the boat of *brahman*. One should hold the breath in here and restrain all bodily movement, and then, when the breath is exhausted, exhale it through one nostril. The wise person should control the mind diligently, as if it were a vehicle yoked to wild horses. (ShvU 2.8-9)

The restriction of body, then of senses and breath, leads to the more intimate self-restraint of mental activities, which is the discipline of meditation (*dhyana-yoga*). The text explains that this practice has purifying effects and leads to a deeper realization.

> Just as a mirror smeared with clay will sparkle brightly once it has been well cleaned, so too an embodied person who perceives the true nature of the atman becomes singular, free from sorrow, with the goal achieved. One who perceives, with the lamp-like atman, the true nature of the *brahman*, unborn and firm—that yogi knows god and is freed from all fetters. (ShvU 2.14-15)

The practice of meditation, according to the *Shvetashvatara*, conveys a particular insight about the nature of things, one that fits closely with the totalizing vision articulated in other Upanishads.

Other schools of thought might gain other insights from yogic practices. The early followers of the Buddha adopted meditative techniques that would demonstrate a Buddhist apprehension of the world. They developed, in fact, two types of meditation. One was quite similar to the one described in the Upanishads and was intended to enable the practitioner to gain a "one-pointedness," or mental stillness. The second type was distinctive to the Buddhists. In the *Satipatthana*

Sutta, the Buddha explains present-moment attention, or mindfulness meditation (*sati*) to his followers, in a series of exercises. The meditator should practice first by paying close attention to the movement of the breath and then move on to the physical postures of the body. From this, one may apply the same present-moment awareness to everyday actions.

> When a monk goes out or returns, he remains mindful of that. When he looks ahead or looks back, he stays mindful of that. When he contracts or stretches out his limbs, he does so mindfully. When putting on robes and picking up bowl, he is mindful. When eating, drinking, consuming food, tasting it, he remains mindful. When defecating or urinating, he stays mindful. When walking, standing, sitting, going to sleep, waking up, talking, staying quiet, he does so mindfully. (MN 10. 8)

At this point, the meditation is not just a set-apart practice; it is a meditative way of being that can be practiced at all times.

Shramanas as Philosophers

It has often been said that Indian philosophy begins with the teachings of the Upanishads and the heterodox Shramanas. While this view may misleadingly reify philosophy as a discrete activity of human reason distinct from an earlier "mythopoetic" stage of thought, it does point toward a real historical development. The new and changing urban culture of northern India undoubtedly provided a setting for diverse and innovative reflections on questions and issues that are fundamentally philosophical, and it generated enough surplus wealth to allow some to pursue such lines of intellectual activity full time. Early Upanishadic thinkers and Shramana figures likewise attempted to set out new comprehensive views of the world that would prove distinctive and persuasive. The sheer variety of viewpoints was extraordinary. One early Jaina text, the *Isibhasiyam*, lists forty-five different philosophers of the period and briefly describes their positions. They include Yajnavalkya and Uddalaka Aruni, other Upanishadic sages, Brahmin renouncers, Buddhists, Jainas, and many other independent Shramana thinkers whose teachings have not been preserved elsewhere.[19]

The brahmodya at Janaka's court, where Yajnavalkya won his cows, illustrates one setting in which philosophical voices were often heard during this period. In competitive settings proponents argued their varied viewpoints in hopes of gaining discursive victory. It also reminds us that philosophy was not an isolated pursuit. Kings and other wealthy elites took an active interest in the debates, formed their own judgments, and enforced their evaluations through selective patronage.

One of the early dialogues of the Buddha, the *Samannaphala Sutta* ("fruits of the Shramana life"), vividly depicts philosophical activity in north Indian urban culture of the Buddha's time and also summarizes several prominent Shramana positions, at least from the Buddhist perspective.[20] The story opens with King Ajatashatru, ruler of Magadha, savoring the cool of a full-moon evening on the terrace of his palace in Rajagriha, surrounded by his ministers. What could be more pleasurable? To complete his enjoyment, Ajatashatru asks if there are any Brahmin or Shramana teachers nearby who might gladden his heart with a little philosophical conversation. The courtiers propose a number of well-known teachers, each of whom has attracted a large group of followers: Purana Kassapa, Makkhali Gosala, Ajita Kesakambali, Pakuddha Kaccayana, Sanjaya Belatthiputta, and Nataputta the Nigantha. (This is the same gang of six that appears in Sabhiya's story in the *Sutta Nipata* and elsewhere in the Buddhist texts.) Ajatashatru indicates his lack of interest in meeting with any of these Shramanas by responding to each suggestion with royal silence. It turns out he has spoken with each of them previously, and each has left him unimpressed. It was as if he had asked them about a mango, he comments, and they had answered by talking about a jackfruit. The king is a critical judge of philosophy and recognizes obfuscation when he sees it.

The king's physician Jivaka now makes a suggestion. Another Shramana teacher, the Buddha Shakyamuni, is currently staying with 1,250 followers in the leafy suburbs of Rajagriha, in Jivaka's own mango grove. Jivaka proposes that a visit to the Buddha might give peace to Ajatashatru's heart. Ajatashatru has five hundred elephants prepared and rides out to the park in full regal pomp. He dismounts, pays his respects to the Buddha, and asks permission to pose some questions. The Buddha politely assents.

Ajatashatru begins his interrogation with a deep challenge. Useful human activities bear visible results for oneself and for others, he observes.

> Sir, there are people who pursue various occupations: elephant drivers, horsemen, charioteers, archers, flag bearers, camp marshals, food servers, fierce warriors, scouts, heroes and champions, warriors in leather, sons of slaves, cooks, barbers, bath attendants, bakers, garland makers, dyers, servants, potters, accountants, counters, and many others. All of them obtain the fruits of their work right here in this visible world. They support themselves and gain happiness by their work. They support and gain happiness for their fathers

> and mothers, their children, friends, and colleagues. They make beneficial donations to Shramanas and Brahmins, which lead to a blissful and happy result, and are conducive to rebirth in heaven. (DN 2.14)

In the division of Magadha labor, Ajatashatru recognizes the personal and societal value of all these varied human activities. They bear visible fruits in this world. Now he throws down his gauntlet: "Sir, can you point to any similar fruit in the life of a Shramana, right here in this visible world?" (DN 2.14) There is no talk of heads splitting here, but the drama of the scene is clear. The most powerful ruler of the time, and a parricide to boot, Ajatashatru does not take to being trifled with. What is the real social benefit of a homeless beggar, such as the Buddha himself is?

The Buddha does not answer Ajatashatru's challenge immediately. Instead, he asks the king whether he has already posed this question to other Shramana teachers. Ajatashatru admits that he has and goes on to relate to the Buddha in impressive detail what the six teachers answered. The king has listened carefully. However, he says, none of these positions has satisfied him. Since he did not wish to disrespect them, he explains, he neither applauded nor criticized. He simply arose from his seat and departed.

It is worth looking at the philosophical viewpoints of the competing Shramanas as Ajatashatru describes them here, even though these arguments did not persuade the king. In some cases the teachers can be identified as founders of important renunciatory orders. Nataputta the Nigantha is none other than Vardhamana or Mahavira, the originator of the Jaina order and a senior contemporary of the Buddha. Makkhali Gosala founded the Ajivika school, a renunciatory order that subscribed to a doctrine of fate or destiny. According to Makkhali, final liberation comes simply when one reaches the end of one's own chain of existences. "It's just like if you throw a ball of string—it will unravel until it runs out. So, too, people both foolish and wise will circle about in transmigration until they come to the end of their suffering" (DN 2.20). The Ajivikas would receive patronage from urban merchants, and even kings, and continued to exist in India as late as the fourteenth century CE.[21]

In other cases the viewpoints themselves were significant, even though the figures did not establish any continuing group of followers. So the teacher Pakuddha Kaccayana articulates an atomist position, in which the universe consists of seven fundamental constituents: earth, water, heat, air, happiness, unhappiness, and the animate spirit. This is an early form of what later becomes the Vaisheshika school. Ajita Kesakambali sets out a materialist position, which in later times would be identified as the Charvaka or Lokayata ("worldly") school of thought. Ajita denies rebirth, denies the notion of moral causation (karman), and denies that there is anyone who has gained liberation. According to the king, Sanjaya Belatthiputta adheres to a strong skeptical or agnostic (*ajnana*) position, supported by a rhetoric of systematic prevarication.

> If you ask me if there is another world, if I thought there is another world, I would say there is another world. But I do not think so, and so I don't say so. But I do not think otherwise, and so I do not say there is not another one. But I don't say that there is not another world either. (DN 2. 32)

And Sanjaya continues in the same way through other topics of philosophical reflections, such as transmigration, moral causation, and the continuing existence of a liberated being. The king has concluded that, of all the Shramana teachers he has met, Sanjaya must be the stupidest. But now he turns to the Buddha and poses his challenge again. The Buddha answers at length, demonstrating the moral value and spiritual rewards of his renunciatory way of life.

In the end (this being a Buddhist text), Ajatashatru is convinced by the Buddha's words and asks to be accepted as a lay follower. He also makes a confession. He admits that he committed a serious transgression: in his desire to become king, he killed his own father. The Buddha accepts the king's admission of responsibility. One who acknowledges one's own transgressions, he states, is capable of growing in moral discipline. But he does not administer any vows. The principles of karman also hold sway. As soon as Ajatashatru is out of earshot, the Buddha explains to his followers that the king's fate is sealed. Some crimes are so egregious that they prevent one from receiving the full benefit of entering into the Buddhist path.

Mahavira and the Jain Quest for Kaivalya

Among the most accomplished of the Shramanas was Vardhamana (490–410 BCE), born in a Kshatriya family in a village near Vaishali. Later he came to be known as Mahavira (the "great hero") and as the Jina ("victor") for his heroic victory over all the afflictions of the human condition. According to early accounts of his life, Vardhamana decided to renounce his worldly possessions and position at the age of thirty, around 460 BCE.[22] He plucked out his hair, gave away all his wealth, and entered the state of homelessness. For thirteen years Vardhamana practiced a particularly rigorous version of Shramana austerities. He gave up all clothing and went about naked. He abstained from bathing, washing his hair, and cleaning his teeth. He fasted and abstained even from drinking water for months at a time. He followed a strict rule of nonviolence toward any living creature. In the cold season he sought no shelter, and during the hot season he squatted in the sun. He slept little and spent most of his time fully absorbed in meditation. Even when people greeted or accosted him he did not respond.

One of the earliest Jain texts, the "Pillow Scripture" of the *Acharanga Sutra*, describes Vardhamana's austere practices and the hardships he suffered as a result. Insects crawled on his meditating body and bit him. People did not always take well to the dirty, naked, unresponsive beggar, and they sometimes struck him with fists, sticks, lances, fruits, clods of dirt, and clay pots. In one place people set their dogs on him, and in another they cut his flesh, tore his hair, and covered him with dust. Yet Vardhamana made no complaints and sought no medical attention. The Pillow Scripture compares the unmoving recipient of all these attacks to a war elephant or to a warrior going into battle: "As a hero at the head of the battle is surrounded on all sides, so was there Mahavira. Bearing all hardships, the Venerable One, undisturbed, proceeded (on the road to Nirvana)."[23] Forbearance is, in the Jaina ethos, a sign of power and a form of heroism.

Finally, one evening Vardhamana reached the culmination of his quest. According to the *Kalpasutra*, he squatted under a shala tree on the bank of a river. After fasting two and a half days, not even drinking water, and engaging in deep meditation, Vardhamana reached the highest knowledge and intuition. The state of *kevala* or *kaivalya* ("autonomy") that Vardhamana attained entails full omniscience, deliverance from all mundane human passions and actions, and final liberation from subsequent rebirth. He was now a Jina, a conqueror of all the adversities that surround ordinary human life. And when he began to teach others and gather followers, Mahavira would be a *tirthankara*, a "ford maker" who shows others how to cross the river of samsara. Those who followed him would be called Jainas.

Quite likely Mahavira was not the first to teach the basic principles of Jaina practice. In fact, Jaina tradition names twenty-three previous Jinas in the current world-era. Of these, at least the twenty-third tirthankara, Parshva, appears to have been a historical figure, anterior to Mahavira. Scholars of the Jaina tradition consider it plausible that Mahavira at some point joined an existing Shramana group of Parshva's followers and later developed a slightly more rigorous code of ascetic conduct. To the fourfold ascetic vow of Parshva's followers—no violence, no falsehood, no theft, and no possessions—Mahavira added a fifth, the vow of chastity.[24] Mahavira also developed a long relationship with the Ajivaka teacher Goshala, who also practiced a rigorous code of austerity.

The world-vision of Parshva and Mahavira, in any case, stresses the central importance of austerity. As with the Upanishadic teachers, but more forcefully and consistently, early Jaina texts envision ignorance and suffering as characteristic and inescapable dimensions of worldly life. Human action, based as it is on desire and passions, maintains this round of suffering. The route to kaivalya, therefore, necessarily involves overcoming one's passions and abstaining from action, insofar as possible. In the view of the early Jainas, this cannot be done while living as a householder in society. To wean oneself fully from passions it is necessary to renounce worldly life and adopt the alternative life of a homeless ascetic. As a Jaina mendicant, one is expected to undergo twenty-two hardships: hunger, thirst, cold, heat, nakedness, abuse, illness, gnats, prickly grass, dirt, corporeal punishment, and more. Just as Mahavira himself did, Jaina ascetics must demonstrate heroic fortitude and resilience in the face of such tribulations.

The quest for kaivalya, as formulated by Mahavira and his followers, also involves great sensitivity toward the sufferings of others. Since all living beings have souls (*jivas*) that are caught up in the same world, all suffer, even though no creature wishes to suffer. To not cause hardship to others, Jainas should be resolute in a policy of nonviolence or nonharming (*ahimsa*). "All breathing, existing, living, sentient creatures should not be slain, nor treated with violence, nor abused, nor tormented, nor driven away," advises the Jaina code for conduct.[25] Mahavira realized the full extent of this during his period of homeless wandering.

> Thoroughly knowing the earth-bodies and water-bodies and fire-bodies and wind-bodies, the lichens, seeds, and sprouts,
>
> He [Mahavira] comprehended that they are, if narrowly inspected, imbued with life, and avoided to injure them; he, the great Hero.[26]

According to Mahavira, living beings surround us, on earth, in the water, in the air, even in fire. Given the ubiquity of life all around, the best recourse is to exercise firm self-control and abstain from unnecessary consumption and activity. This far-reaching ethics of nonviolence lies at the center of the Jaina vision of the good life.

The importance of nonharming in the ethos of Mahavira led the early Jainas to articulate a particularly strong condemnation of Vedic sacrifice. The story of Harikesa, told in the *Uttaradhyanana*, offers a dramatic illustration.[27] Harikesa is born in a lowly community of Shvapachas ("dog cookers"), an outcaste tribe, but he nevertheless becomes a Jaina monk and practices all the rules and restraints proper to a follower of Mahavira. The path of the Jainas is not limited by birth status, the story makes clear, but it is open to all humans, even those low-born groups who are said to eat dog meat. One day on his wanderings, Harikesa comes to a place where Brahmins are carrying out a sacrifice. The Brahmins observe the ill-clad, emaciated anchorite approaching and call out in derision:

> Who is that dandy coming there? He is swarthy, dreadful, with a turned-up nose, miserably clad, a very devil (*pisaca*) of a dirty man, with a filthy cloth put on his neck?
>
> Who are you, you monster? Or for what purpose have you come here? You miserably clad devil of a dirty man! Go, get away! Why stand you there?[28]

They fear that the outcaste will pollute their sacrificial enclosure. Their apprentices rush at Harikesa and beat him with sticks, canes, and whips. While Harikesa endures the assault without reciprocal violence, some semidivine Yakshas come to his assistance and defend him from the hostile Brahmin students. The chief Brahmin sees what is happening and immediately apologizes to Harikesa. Now recognizing the virtue of the mendicant, he asks Harikesa to explain to him the proper method of sacrifice.

Sacrifice (*yajna*) is not a fixed term in early India. Rather, it is an open-ended discursive category susceptible to debate and redefinition. The Brahmin sacrificer here gives Harikesa an opening to present his own definition of the term. Harikesa immediately explains true sacrifice as "doing no injury to living beings of the six orders, abstaining from lying and from taking what is not freely given, renouncing property, women, pride, and deceit, men should live under self-restraint."[29] No longer a violent taking of animal and plant life and abandonment of materials into a consuming fire, the right sacrifice here in the Jaina scheme of values is an individual's own abandonment of harmful actions. In other words, Harikesa tells the Brahmin sacrificer, the right way to sacrifice is to adhere to the code of conduct of a follower of Mahavira. Harikesa goes on to provide correlates and substitutions for each element in Vedic sacrifice. The sacrificial fire is penance. The cow dung used to fuel the fire is the ascetic's body. The oblations are self-control, right exertion, and tranquility. While the *Mundaka Upanishad* demotes Vedic sacrifice to a lower form of knowledge, the Jaina narrator of Harikesa's tale seeks to replace sacrifice altogether with the Jaina code of conduct, defined as the proper sacrifice.

The Awakened One and His Followers

Slightly younger than Vardhamana, Gautama Siddhartha was born around 480 BCE to a Kshatriya family in Kushinagara, in the foothills of the Himalayas along the present-day border between Nepal and India.[30] In the *Mahasaccaka Sutta*, Gautama explains to the Jain interlocutor Saccaka how he became the Buddha, the "awakened one."[31] While in the prime of his life, and over the tearful objections of his parents, Gautama shaved off his hair and beard, put on an ochre-colored renouncer's robe, and left his home and family. He set out, he says, to find the supreme state of sublime peace. First he sought out two other Shramana teachers, Alara Kalama and Uddaka Ramaputta, and learned what they had to teach. But their lessons did not lead him to the highest goal. They did not lead, he reflected, to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nirvana. So he abandoned them and continued on his own.

Next he experimented with extreme forms of asceticism. He tried meditating without breathing, but this just produced a violent burning in his body. He tried to reduce his food to almost nothing. But this only caused his body to waste away. His limbs became like the jointed segments of bamboo stems, his ribs jutted out like the crazy rafters of an old roofless barn, and his scalp shriveled and withered like a bitter gourd. If he tried to defecate or urinate, he fell over onto his face. In contrast to Vardhamana's heroic ascetic fortitude, Gautama came to realize that emaciation was not leading him to enlightenment. But then he remembered that once when he was younger, sitting in the cool shade of a rose-apple tree while his father worked nearby, he had entered into a spontaneous meditation that, while having nothing to do with sensual pleasures, was itself pleasurable. Perhaps he could recover that easier method of meditation. It would be a Middle Way, as the Buddhists would put it, between the sensual indulgence of worldly life and the bodily abnegation of more radical Shramana groups like the Jains and Ajivakas. So he ate some solid food and, with renewed strength, entered into the reflections and meditations that would lead to his full enlightenment.

According to Buddhist tradition, two verses arose in Gautama's mind when he attained Nirvana.

Wandering through a cycle of countless births, searching,
But never finding, the builder of the house—
Birth over and over is suffering!
But now I see you, house-builder.
You will not build that house again:
All its rafters are broken, its ridge-pole destroyed.
The mind, freed from its conditions,
Has come to the end of all craving.
(DhP 153–154)

His awakening, then, involved liberation at two levels. Most immediately he was freed from the "cravings" that keep other humans attached to their worldly lives. Free from those attachments, he thereby attained liberation from the transmigratory cycle of deaths and rebirths that are the lot of all other living beings.

Awakened at age thirty-five, Gautama—now the Buddha Shakyamuni—spent the remaining forty-five years of his life walking about the central Gangetic plains of northern India, teaching and gaining followers. His words, carefully remembered by his disciples, would become the Buddhist Dharma. His followers would form themselves into a Sangha, a community of monks, nuns, and lay adherents. Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha are the three "jewels" on which Buddhism is founded.

The Ideal Sage

What were the Buddha's teachings? An enormous body of early Buddhist writing remains, and much of it is attributed to the Buddha Shakyamuni himself. Buddhists consider the words of the Buddha, the *buddhavachana*, to be particularly authoritative, the worthiest of words, precisely because they are spoken by a fully enlightened one. The early Buddhists appropriated the term Dharma to designate these teachings.

Among the earliest collections of Buddhist teachings is the *Sutta Nipata*. This brief collection of stories, dialogues, and metaphor-filled hortatory verses likely circulated orally among the followers of the Buddha as an early guidebook for the new movement. It sets out the way of life of the ideal practitioner and the personal virtues that are cultivated by living that life. The Buddha himself, of course, is the exemplar of that ideal sage. He is the one who has, by his own efforts, found and traversed the path to the other shore. As he tells Dhaniya the herdsman, "I tied together a firm raft, and I crossed over the flood to the other shore. Now I no longer need the raft" (SN 1.2.4). But it is possible for others, using the Buddha's teachings as a manual, to construct similar rafts and emulate his attainments.

In the *Sutta Nipata*, the path begins with a departure, a setting out (*pravrajana*). For those who would follow the Buddha fully, it is necessary to leave home and family, since attachment to family is like a thick tangled clump of bamboo. Attachments to material things can catch one, like a fishhook in the throat. One must shed these hindrances like an ebony tree sheds its leaves, don instead the simple robe of the ascetic, and live independent of worldly obstacles. In the *Sutta Nipata*, the Buddhist mendicants celebrate their splendid separation from worldly attachments with the refrain, “One should live alone, like the horn of a rhinoceros” (SN 1.3.1).

The spirit of renunciation extends more broadly in these teachings. Sages are also called upon to repudiate any attachment to their own bodies. The wise sage, listening to the Buddha’s word, should compare the body to a corpse—“it is impure, it smells bad, and it oozes here and there with the many stenches of a rotting corpse”—and thereby gain “victory” over it (SN 1.11.13). Still more intimate, the sage must abandon all those unhealthy mental responses and malign psychological attitudes that bind one to the world: anger, lust, craving, pride, ill-temper, hatred. One should give these up, just as a snake sheds its old worn-out skin.

The sage practices this discipline of shedding through a regimen of the utmost simplicity: begging and meditation. The Buddha outlines this way of life for his nephew Nalaka, who wishes to become a monk. A monk goes around collecting donations of food for his meals, and then goes off to the edge of the woods and sits down under a tree. There the monk should practice meditation. The Buddha emphasizes that, if done with skill, this is a pleasurable activity. “Even living at the root of a tree at the edge of the forest, he can meditate and become happy” (SN 3.11.31). After spending the night, the monk goes off again to the village to beg. He takes what he gets, without any judgment, and then he returns to his tree.

The Buddha tells Nalaka that this will lead to the highest state of wisdom. His conviction is that shedding material and mental attachments and following this simple way of life will lead to a profound personal transformation. Without material attachments, the sage will be content, self-contained, and independent. Without attraction or aversion toward others, the sage will adopt an attitude of nonharming and physical and emotional nonviolence. Without egoistic attachment to one’s own self, the sage will appear modest. Descriptions of this ideal sage, on the path toward Nirvana, appear throughout the *Sutta Nipata*. The sage is contented, easily supported, with few duties, of light livelihood, with senses calmed, discreet, not impudent, not greedily attached to families. Moreover, this modest contentment will lead to an attitude of maternal loving-kindness, not just toward one’s own relatives, but toward all beings. “As a mother would protect her only son with her very life, so a monk should cultivate unlimited love toward all beings. He should direct this limitless loving-kindness to beings in all the worlds—above, below, and in between—without obstruction, without hostility, and without anger” (SN 1.8.7-8). By taking the raft of this simple and powerful way of life, the Buddha promises in these early teachings, the monk will also cross over to that place where the raft is no longer needed, never to be born again.

Who Is a Brahmin? What Is a Veda?

Despite the ideals of solitariness and humility that the Buddha Shakyamuni prescribed for his followers, the early Buddhist works depict the Buddha himself as deeply and repeatedly engaged in conversation and dispute with others. He was no rhinoceros horn. Traveling around northern India, staying most often on the outskirts of the new cities of his time, he spoke not just to his own followers, but also to kings, gods, earthly deities, other ascetics, and ordinary people like Dhaniya the herdsman. And frequently, he engaged in debates with Vedic Brahmins. The Brahmins who appear in these dialogues enjoy comfortable lives. They are settled, most often, in substantial Brahmin settlements, called *brahmadeyas*, on tax-free lands granted to them by rulers with the expectation that they will maintain the Vedas and perform sacrifices for the prosperity of all. The Buddha disparagingly contrasts the newfound luxury of these Brahmin settlements with the older way of Brahmin life, when, he says, they lived in the forest and led modest lives.

In his conversations with Brahmins, we see the Buddha disputing the most crucial presuppositions of the Vedic worldview: the authority of the Vedas as revealed texts that lead to the highest ends, the innate privilege of the Brahmin atop the hierarchy of classes based on birth, and the efficacy of Vedic sacrifice as the preeminent form of religious action. But the Buddha did not simply disagree with these claims. Rather, following a rhetorical strategy of appropriation, he sought to redefine these terms—Veda, Brahmin, sacrifice—and claim them for his own order. Just as the Jain mendicant Harikesa, formerly of the dog-cooker class, instructs Brahmins on Jain ascetic practice as the superior form of sacrifice, so the Buddha sets out to demonstrate that the true Brahmins are in fact Buddhist monks.

In the *Vasettha Sutta*, which is part of the *Sutta Nipata,* the Buddha converses with two young Brahmin students, Vasettha and Bharadvaja, who live in a prosperous Brahmin settlement. The students have different teachers, both experts in the Veda, who have taught them diverging views. They get into an argument over the factors that make one a Brahmin. Vasettha holds that good action and observance of duties confer Brahmin status. Bharadvaja instead avers that it is family descent. One who is born in a pure family of Brahmins is a Brahmin. Unable to resolve the issue, they put the matter to the Buddha, staying in the forest nearby, about whom they have heard good things.

When Vasettha lays out the disagreement, the Buddha takes up the question of birth status. One can immediately recognize that different kinds of living things belong to different species (*jati*, literally “birth-group”), with defining characteristics. But among humans, he continues, there are not distinct species. Differences among humans are simply conventional. Contrary to Bharadvaja’s view, the Buddha insists that we designate human identities according to one’s activities or occupations. One who keeps cows and lives off their produce, we call a farmer, and one who makes a living practicing a particular craft, we call a craftsman. “No one is a Brahmin by birth, and no one is not a Brahmin by birth. One becomes a Brahmin through actions, and one becomes a non-Brahmin through actions” (SN 3.9.57). This leaves the Buddha free to consider what it is that a Brahmin does to gain Brahmin-hood. It is not memorizing Vedas or performing sacrifices that grants one the status of Brahmin, claims the Buddha. Rather one becomes a Brahmin by living a renunciatory life. The Brahmin is restrained, independent, nonviolent, without possessions or attachments, and so on. “One becomes a Brahmin,” he concludes, “through austerity, abstinence, self-control, and moderation. This is the best Brahmin” (SN 3.9.62). The true Brahmin, the Buddha explains to his two young Brahmin interlocutors, looks just like a Buddhist monk.

Because Shramana leaders and their communities of followers like the Jains and Buddhists strongly rejected the foundations of the Vedic worldview, later scholars have often designated them as “heterodox” groups, outside the dominant doctrine or tradition. By this binary characterization, those who maintained fealty to the Vedic tradition, including Upanishadic renouncers, were considered “orthodox,” conforming to the true or correct doctrine. But this classification takes for granted that the Vedas were, by some authority, the central tradition among the developing religious cultures of India. Jains and Buddhists certainly did not see themselves as outside any existing center. With their appropriation and redefinition of those foundational terms of the Vedic Brahmins—sacrifice, Dharma, Brahmin, and even Veda—they were seeking to claim that vital center for their own views and practices. What that center would be was a matter of ongoing religious and ideological debate.

The World the Renouncers Made

The solitary sage calmly meditating under a tree at the edge of the forest would become an enduring image of Indic religiosity. As urban culture expanded in the Gangetic plains, the forest (*vana*, *aranya*) was cast as the “other” landscape, outside the new cities and just beyond the settled villages and plowed fields. The forest was beyond the zone of everyday society, outside the attachments and obligations of family and community. In classical Indian literature, the forest would be portrayed as a place of wonder and fantasy, a meeting place of humans with the supernatural, a dangerous source of powers beyond the ordinary. And the edge of the forest was the place to which the renouncers retreated to shed the old skin of attachments, desires, and suffering. This was the proper landscape for the individual spiritual quest to reach the "highest." The different renunciatory groups gave that highest state different names, understood it in differing ways, and sought to reach it by distinctive paths. But all saw something to be gained through this practice of shedding, as an individual, apart from the social and family networks that inhibit, constrain, and induce desire and attachment. Perhaps from this they would gain extraordinary powers, such as remarkable calm and forbearance, special wisdom, and the release from future rebirth.

The renunciatory forest, however, was not the deep dark forest of the isolated hermit, nor the snow caves of the Himalayas. By all indications, the spiritual seekers of this era—at least the ones who left behind traces of their quests and who attracted followers that could transmit their teachings—remained near the new cities of the Gangetic plains. Begging kept them close to settlements, and they actively engaged in teaching, conversation, and debate. The most successful Shramana teachers formed continuing communities of disciples, which have persisted for two and a half millennia. The renunciatory Upanishadic Brahmins and the Shramanas left a legacy of new religious philosophies, yogic practices, and movements that challenged the Vedic elite. It was possible for an individual seeker, through his or her own efforts, to gain the highest.

This image of the Indian renouncer possessing special wisdom or power traveled beyond South Asia early on, and it became one of the most common stereotypical images of Indian religion. It was powerful enough still to speak to German novelist Hermann Hesse in the aftermath of a devastating world war, to countercultural readers and travelers in the 1960s, and no doubt to religious seekers for decades to come.

5

The Mauryan Era: Religious Cultures of Empire (321–187 BCE)

ENTERING THE SARNATH MUSEUM, a visitor is immediately confronted by four lions. Standing in the center of the main entrance hall, four addorsed stone lions face out in the four directions. Each lion stands above a spoked wheel on a circular abacus with a frieze of four masculine animals—elephant, horse, bull, and lion—moving in a clockwise direction. The abacus in turn rests on a bell in the pattern of an inverted lotus bud. The whole composition, seven feet in height, glistens in a highly polished beige sandstone (**Plate 3**). The museum has placed it on a pedestal so the lions can look out over the heads of all visitors.

Once, this sculpted lion capital stood atop a tall tapered column, some thirty-eight feet in height, made of the same polished sandstone. The stump of the column remains in the ground, not too far from the museum, in its original base. Four other fragments of the broken column have been placed nearby, under a protective canopy. In ancient times, this column served as a towering pedestal for a stone wheel, with thirty-two spokes, about two and a half feet in diameter (**Fig. 6**). A few fragments of that crowning wheel are displayed on a wall of the museum, behind the lion capital. On the stump, a message is engraved in ancient Brahmi letters. The inscription allows us to identify the entire structure—column, capital, and wheel—as the work of the Mauryan king Ashoka, who identifies himself as "beloved of the gods." Ashoka Maurya ruled in the middle of the third century BCE.

The column and its capital still stood intact nearly nine hundred years later, when the Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Xuanzang visited in 629 BCE. He described it as a stone pillar about seventy feet high, "as smooth as jade and as reflective

FIGURE 6. Reconstruction of Sarnath Pillar and Wheel. Graphic courtesy of Matt Davis, Perfectly Acceptable Press, based on design by J. Irwin.

as a mirror." He continues, "This was the place where the Tathāgata, after having attained full enlightenment, first turned the wheel of the Dharma."[1] As Xuanzang recognized, the pillar marked the place in Deer Park, about six miles north of the ancient city of Varanasi, where the Buddha Shakyamuni first "turned the wheel of Dharma" by conveying his newfound enlightenment to five ascetic acquaintances. Buddhist works describe this powerful new teaching as a "lion's roar," resounding outward in every direction. Thus, the lofty jade-like pillar with four lions atop, mouths open and roaring in the four cardinal directions, served as a powerful statement of the expansive ambitions of the Buddhist community during Mauryan rule.

At the same time, lions could equally be viewed as royal symbols, signs of the sovereign power of a king like Ashoka. The moving wheel represents, within an Indian metaphorical vocabulary, expansive dominion. The term for a universal ruler or emperor is *chakravartin*, one who "moves the wheel" or extends sovereignty in every direction. So Ashoka's pillar and lion capital, rising in the landscape at the place where the Buddha delivered his first discourse, spoke in a double register, of two imperial agendas. It pointed both to the desire of the Buddhist community to spread the Buddha's liberating message outward to every region, and to the intention of the Mauryan rulers to create an imperial order extending throughout the subcontinent. Maintained now in the Sarnath Museum, it has also served as an emblem for new expansive political agendas in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Imperial Formations

The Mauryans were the first great imperial formation of the Indian subcontinent. They united a large portion of South Asia under a single rule, from 320 BCE until the overthrow of the empire in 185 BCE. But the Mauryans drew upon imperial examples and models from farther west—most notably the Achaemenid empire centered in Persia (modern Iran), which lasted over two centuries, from 550 to 330 BCE. Also important was the much briefer world-conquering campaign of Alexander of Macedon, which put an end to the Achaemenids in 330 BCE but effectively collapsed as a unified polity with Alexander's own death in 323 BCE. The Mauryans would appropriate some of the practices from these earlier western models, particularly from the Achaemenids, while developing their own distinctive Indic imperial forms. They would articulate empire in an Indian vocabulary.

As imperial polities, all three—Achaemenids, Alexander, and Mauryans—had to deal with two primary tasks: that of effectively administering large discontinuous territories and that of representing persuasively the nature and beneficial qualities of their rule. Writing in mid-nineteenth-century Britain, at the center of another great world-spanning empire, the political economist Walter Bagehot suggested that every "constitution," or ruling authority, has two parts or aspects. The first part he termed the "dignified" element. This part excites and preserves the reverence of those within a regime. The second would be the "efficient" part, by which that polity in fact works and rules. "Every constitution must first *gain* authority, and then *use* authority; it must first win the loyalty and confidence of mankind, and then must employ that homage in the work of government."[2] Bagehot spells out what he means by the dignified aspects of a constitution: "The elements which excite the most easy reverence will be the most *theatrical* elements—those which appeal to the senses, which claim to be embodiments of the greatest human ideas, which boast in some cases of far more than human origin."[3] It is here, in the theater of representation, in the "greatest human ideas" that sometimes claim "more than human origin," that religious ideas and practices enter most intimately into the workings of political power. In this chapter, we will be concerned with the religious cultures of ancient empires. The primary focus will be on the imperial policies of Ashoka and on Buddhism under the Mauryan rule.

The Achaemenids and Alexander

In 539 BCE the Achaemenid ruler Cyrus II, based in the Iranian Plateau, captured the key city-state of Babylon on the Euphrates River. He overthrew the old ruler and had himself proclaimed the new king of Babylon. He and his successors Cambyses and Darius carried out a series of campaigns in all directions: north into Central Asia, westward as far as northern Africa, and east toward India as far as the Indus River. By the time of Xerxes (r. 486–465 BCE), the Achaemenids ruled a vast empire stretching from Libya to South Asia. It encompassed the old civilization zones of Egypt and Mesopotamia, and much of the territory of the former Indus Valley civilization as well. Within its dominion were a remarkable diversity of different communities following different customs and worshipping different gods. The Achaemenids were the first great world-conquering empire.[4]

Cyrus and other Achaemenid rulers spoke a form of Old Persian, an Indo-Iranian cousin to Sanskrit within the larger Indo-European family. Much like the Indo-Aryans who had migrated into the Indian subcontinent, the early Persians used the term *arya* to distinguish themselves from other surrounding tribes. In the Iranian Plateau, they adopted the new religion of the *Gathas*, attributed to the prophetic visionary Zarathustra. Zarathustra postulates a fundamental cosmic dualism of Order (*asha*) and Confusion (*drug*). The creator god, known as Ahura Mazda, is identified as the "father of Order." The other countervailing force, Confusion, is associated with another divine being, Angra Mainyu. The struggle of these two cosmic principles is also played out among humans. People may choose to affiliate themselves with Ahura Mazda and create order within their world, or not. The new Zoroastrian religious practices were carried out by a special hereditary priestly group, the *magi*. Their sacerdotal role was similar to that of the Brahmins in India, who transmitted the Vedas and officiated at Vedic sacrifices.

The Achaemenid rulers portrayed themselves as human agents of the divine Ahura Mazda. Their rule, they claimed, brought order to the earth. As Darius I put it, "Ahura Mazda is the great God who created this earth, who created that sky, who created humans, who created happiness for humanity, who made Darius king."[5] But Ahura Mazda's universal order did not preclude the recognition of other gods and their claims on particular human communities.

Upon conquering Babylon in 539 BCE, Cyrus II issued a proclamation. He also had it written down in Babylonian script on a fired-clay cylinder that was buried in the foundations of the city wall.[6] According to the proclamation, the previous king of Babylon had alienated the various gods, including Marduk, the palladium deity of Babylon. As the cylinder inscription describes it, Marduk identified the king of nearby Persia, Cyrus, as a hero who could restore proper order to the city. Marduk recruited Cyrus to march on Babylon, where the people accepted the new ruler joyously. Shifting to the imperial first person, Cyrus identifies himself as "Cyrus, king of the universe, the great king" and as a votary of Marduk. He claims that he has soothed the weariness of the population and freed them from their bonds. He has restored the temples, and the gods have returned to their sanctuaries.

At this time, too—we learn from the Book of Ezra in the Hebrew Bible—Cyrus acted on behalf of the Jewish god Yahweh. The Lord of Israel, Ezra reports, "stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia" and inspired him to free the captive Israelite community to return from Babylon to Jerusalem. According to Ezra, Cyrus issued a proclamation: "The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem in Judah."[7] Ezra and the Israelites were free to understand Cyrus to be an instrument of Yahweh's will. The Achaemenids, by contrast, would have viewed the Israelite god as a local deity of a peripheral community, like Marduk of Babylon, included within the overarching order of Ahura Mazda. When the Israelites returned to Jerusalem, they would remain still within the broader Achaemenid territories.

In bringing so many territories of the world within a single imperial polity, the Achaemenids had to find a way to administer their far-flung territories effectively and to articulate a compelling reason for this imperial formation. They found it within the order that Ahura Mazda wished on earth. The Achaemenid rulers envisioned themselves as fashioning this order. It would be an inclusive order. Within Ahura Mazda's tolerant overarching regime, the Achaemenid rulers would allow the varied communities living within the empire to maintain their own gods and practices of interacting with them—as long as they also participated appropriately within the larger ceremonial economy of the empire.

In 515 BCE, Darius began construction of a vast new administrative and ceremonial center at Persepolis. In the foundation inscription, Darius explains that he was carrying out the intention of Ahura Mazda. "By the grace of Ahuramazda I built this fortress. And Ahuramazda was of such a mind, together with all the other gods, that this fortress (should) be built. And (so) I built it. And I built it secure and beautiful and adequate, just as I was intending to."[8] Construction of this imperial capital would continue for over a century, until the time of Xerxes.

Both a seat of government and also an awe-inspiriting center for imperial gatherings, Persepolis consisted of five great halls atop a high-walled platform. The most magnificent of these structures was the Apadana, an enormous audience hall, covering over ten thousand square feet, in which seventy-two columns, each one almost eighty feet tall, supported a wooden-beamed roof. To reach the hall on its raised terrace were two monumental stairways. These were adorned with a remarkable series of relief carvings depicting an imperial tribute procession. At the center of this composition, the king is seated under a royal canopy. An official bows before the king. The kneeling figure may be the marshal of the ceremony. Approaching the king, delegations from twenty-three different subject

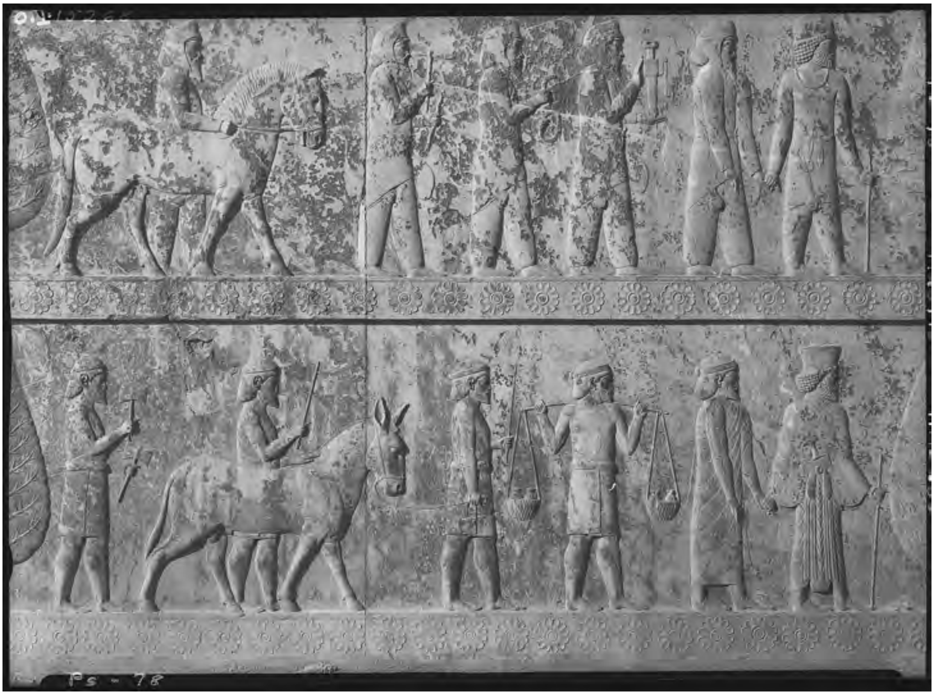


FIGURE 7. Tribute Procession: Indian delegation, on Persepolis Apadana eastern stairway, 6th century BCE. Persepolis, Iran. Courtesy of the Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures of the University of Chicago.

nations step in formal dignity, bearing gifts. All the peoples of the far-flung empire are assembled together in this parade. Each delegation is depicted in a distinctive regional manner; garments, headdresses, hairstyles, beards, and gifts vary among each one. The Indian delegation, for example, appears barefooted and bare-chested, wearing dhotis, leading a donkey, and carrying bottles of perfume (**Fig. 7**). Overall, the sculpted composition on the stairway presents an idealized portrait of Achaemenid imperium. All the violence and coercion that may have been required to form and maintain this empire have been erased here. The subject peoples appear not as subjugated militarily, but as voluntarily participating in a timeless, orderly, shared ceremony. As Margaret Cool Root puts it, Achaemenid art sought to convey "a vision which stressed images of piety, control, and harmonious order."[9]

In 330 BCE, the Macedonian general Alexander, on his own campaign of world conquest, defeated the Persians. Alexander and his troops occupied

Persepolis for four months, during which time they thoroughly looted the sumptuous capital. Plutarch relates that twenty thousand mules and five thousand camels were employed to cart the spoils off to the west.[10] Then the occupying army burnt down the city, a clear sign that Achaemenid imperial rule was fully and truly demolished.

Thus far, Alexander's eight-year campaign had largely followed the contours of the Achaemenid territory. Beyond this, to the east, lay India. For the Greeks, the term "India"—derived from the Indic term *sindhu* for river, applied to the Indus River—designated all lands east of the Hindu Kush mountain range. Greek geographical knowledge of the eastern regions of Asia was scanty. According to Herodotus, Asia was inhabited as far east as India, but beyond that was empty land. No one, he reported, could describe what those more distant lands were like.[11] If Alexander were truly to conquer the entire inhabited world, the *oikumene*, then India had to form part of that dominion. From Persepolis, Alexander's army marched east into the northern Indus River area. He engaged in several battles in this region and briefly considered pushing still farther east, toward the Ganges River, which he had been told was just a twelve-day march. But his troops dissented. They had come far enough. Likely, too, they were put off by reports of the massive force waiting to oppose them in India—80,000 cavalry, 200,000 infantry, 8,000 chariots, and 6,000 war elephants, as Plutarch later recounted.[12] The war elephants must have been especially daunting; in their many campaigns the Greek troops had never faced these before.[13] Faced with a mutiny, Alexander decided to turn back, down the Indus and then through Persepolis to Babylon. He died there in 323 BCE.

It is not possible to say what shape Alexander's Hellenistic empire might have taken, for following his death it did not survive intact. His generals struggled with one another to succeed him, and in short order the dominion was divided into three main dynasties. Among these, Seleucus Nicator took control of the easternmost portions of Alexander's conquests. The Seleucid dynasty he established had its center in Babylonia and northern Syria. Initially it extended as far as the Indus River, where it bordered the powerful new polity taking shape in India, the Mauryan kingdom.

Alexander Meets the Naked Philosophers of India

Alexander's incursion into the Indus River area, and the establishment of the Seleucid kingdom under Seleucus Nicator after Alexander's death, brought the Indian world into a more direct and continuing relationship with the Hellenistic

Greek sphere centered farther to the west. The city of Taxila and the Gandhara region, spanning the upper Indus basin (in modern-day Pakistan), would be a meeting ground of cultures for centuries to come. Even before Alexander, however, India had figured in the Greek imagination as an object of inquiry, speculation, and fantasy.

Writing in the fifth century BCE, a century before Alexander, Herodotus incorporated into his *Histories* reports about India, mediated through his Persian interlocutors. India, he reported, was the twentieth province under Persian rule. (By "India," he meant the area in the Indus River basin, in the northwestern corner of the subcontinent, that fell under Achaemenid overlordship.) It was the most populous of the provinces and contributed the most gold to the imperial coffers. In his account, we hear of one tribe of Indians who are said to eat their own parents, and another tribe so dark in complexion that the males ejaculate black semen. All living creatures, he says, are larger in India than anywhere else. Herodotus's most enduring Indian report describes gold-digging ants. In the burning deserts of India live giant ants, larger than foxes. As they burrow down to make their underground homes, they heap up mounds of sand rich with gold. Indians foray out to collect the gold and use camels to transport it back from the desert. But they must do so quickly, because the ants can smell humans and will chase them down in pursuit.[14]

In modern disciplinary terms, Herodotus was as much a pioneering ethnographer and folklorist as he was a historian, and he was quite happy to record all the marvelous things he heard from his informants. "I am obliged to record the things I am told," he notes, "but I am certainly not required to believe them—this remark may be taken to apply to the whole of my account."[15] And certainly, some of the amazing things he reported proved to be accurate. He wrote of the "wool that grows on trees," which turns out to be cotton. Nevertheless, Herodotus's observations of India as a larger-than-life land full of wonders would serve as an early foundation in the long-term construction in the Western imagination of India as home to the fantastic and marvelous, an exotic Oriental "Other."

Upon reaching the Indus, Alexander and his associates came into direct contact with India. Throughout his campaigns, Alexander took care to have observations and records made of geography, natural flora and fauna, and the peoples he encountered. He was, after all, a pupil of Aristotle, a student of the world. Several of his associates wrote down eyewitness accounts of his deeds and encounters. These reports of Alexander's campaigns no longer exist in their original form, but portions were incorporated into later compositions narrating the astonishing career of Alexander. The most astute of these later works is Arrian's *Anabasis Alexandrou*, composed around 130 CE.

Arrian had served as a high official within the Roman administration under Hadrian. He wrote his *Anabasis* at the peak of Roman imperial power, when leaders like Pompey and Julius Caesar had sought to emulate for Rome what the Macedonian general had accomplished for Greece. But in his largely laudatory narrative, Arrian also recognizes the limits of world conquest. At the moment when Alexander was reaching the eastern end point of his campaign, dealing with weary and recalcitrant troops in the northwest corner of India, the Macedonian general encountered the "naked philosophers" (*gymnosophists*) of Taxila. Arrian's account provides a fascinating Greek window into the renunciatory ascetics of northern Indian in the fourth century BCE. At the same time, it inserts a skeptical anti-imperial voice into Arrian's favorable portrait of Alexander.[16]

When they first encounter Alexander and his army, Arrian tells us, the Indian sages merely stomp on the ground. Alexander inquires about this odd behavior, and the sages reply:

> King Alexander, each man can have only so much land as this on which we are standing. You are human like the rest of us, except that in your restlessness and arrogance you travel so far from home, making trouble for yourself and others. Well, you will soon be dead and will have as much land as will suffice to bury your corpse.[17]

Alexander admires the independence and endurance of the naked ascetics and attempts to recruit their leader, named Dandamis, to join him. But Dandamis replies, if you are really the son of Zeus then so am I. He is content with his lot, he goes on, and in his view Alexander and his troops are wandering all over the world for no good purpose. There is nothing he desires that Alexander could offer him. And so, in the end, Alexander recognizes that Dandamis is truly a free man and does not try to coerce him. Instead, he finds another, more pliable Indian sage, Kalanos, to join the traveling army. Arrian adds that Kalanos came to be reproached by his fellow sages for his utter lack of self-control and his willingness to serve another master.

Who were these naked philosophers of Taxila? Alexander and his companions conversed with them through layers of interpreters, and they had no background knowledge of the kinds of doctrinal discussions that Indian religious seekers had been conducting for the past several centuries. This has left scholars to speculate: Were they Buddhists? Or Jains? Or some variety of Brahmin renouncers?[18] Among the Shramanas of this period, as we have seen, there was a tremendous diversity of ascetic practice and religious speculation. The nakedness of the gymnosophists suggests they may have been early "sky-clad" (Digambara) Jains. But other renunciatory groups also disdained the vanity of clothing. What they say, as Arrian describes it, would have been common currency among many Shramana communities. They have renounced attachment to worldly acquisitions, and they are not tempted by the kinds of wealth and power that Alexander can offer them. Against the idea that Alexander has some special divine blood, they stress spiritual equality. Either everyone is a "son of Zeus," or no one is. Death falls equally on all mortals. They are critical of the "arrogance" of a conquering king like Alexander and emphasize the "trouble" these military excursions bring upon the innocent. In the end, their specific identity is less important than the dramatic contrast that these Indian philosophers, naked but free, offer to the arduous empire-building enterprise of the Macedonian general.

Mauryan Foundations: Chandragupta and Chanakya

Meanwhile, back in the central Gangetic plains, the Nanda dynasty, founded by Mahapadma Nanda around 350 BCE, had continued the process of Magadha-centered political consolidation, dating back to the time of the Buddha and King Ajatashatru. When Alexander appeared on the northwest scene, the Nandas enjoyed broad control across the entire Ganges area. Most likely, the reports of vast forces arrayed against them that so discouraged Alexander's troops referred to the armies of the Nanda ruler.

In 320 BCE, Chandragupta Maurya overthrew the Nanda ruler and set about establishing a new Ganges-centered state with its capital at Pataliputra (modern Patna, in Bihar state). Chandragupta's origins are obscure. He did not come from a conventional Kshatriya princely lineage. According to one tradition, he got his start as a military officer fighting in the northwest. Plutarch reports that Alexander met a young man with that name during his Punjab campaigns. Once Chandragupta had usurped Nanda rule at Pataliputra, he solidified his hold on the Gangetic region and also occupied territories as far south as the Narmada River. Then in 305 BCE, after Alexander's death, Chandragupta shifted his attention to the northwest, where he took on invading Seleucid forces under Seleucus Nicator.

Chandragupta was evidently successful in repulsing the Seleucids, for in the ensuing treaty the Mauryans got the better of the deal. The Mauryan kingdom acquired all the eastern territories held by the Seleucids as far as the Kabul Valley in present-day Afghanistan. This included all the rich lands of the Indus basin and also provided the Mauryans with a strong hold on the east-west overland trade routes. In return, Chandragupta presented five hundred war elephants to Seleucus. These formidable beasts gave Seleucus a decided advantage over his other opponents to the west, where elephants proved to be a military innovation. Finally, to solidify ongoing relations between the two kingdoms, they arranged a marriage exchange. The two states maintained diplomatic relations, and the Seleucid ruler sent his ambassador Megasthenes to reside in the Mauryan capital.[19] With the new acquisitions in central India and in the northwest, the new Mauryan polity under Chandragupta established the foundation of the first empire centered in the Indian subcontinent.

Chandragupta had help, of course. According to a widespread narrative tradition, a Brahmin adviser from Taxila named Chanakya played a key role in Chandragupta's usurpation of the Nanda throne and his consolidation of Mauryan rule.[20] In this popular story cycle, preserved in many later versions, Chanakya becomes enraged when relatives berate his wife for her poverty. Determined to become wealthy, Chanakya sets out for the Nanda capital, since he has heard that the ruler there is generous to Brahmins. But when he arrogantly sits on the king's throne, Chanakya is unceremoniously kicked out of the city. Even angrier than before, he vows to find a new king through whom he can destroy the Nanda dynasty. He adopts young Chandragupta Maurya as a promising protégé. Together they make an initial attack on the Nanda capital, and they are decisively defeated.

Wandering about in exile, Chanakya happens to overhear a mother scolding her son. The boy has put his finger into the middle of a bowl of porridge and burned himself. His mother counsels him to eat from the edges, where the porridge is cooler. Chanakya quickly grasps the political application of the mother's sage advice. Now starting their campaign in the hinterlands, he and Chandragupta form an alliance with a feudatory king ruling in the hills, known as Parvata. The allies are then able to advance from the peripheries of the Nanda kingdom to its center, where they overthrow the Nanda king. Chanakya subsequently conspires to have Parvata assassinated, and he assists Chandragupta in removing the remaining Nanda loyalists and other opponents to uncontested Mauryan sovereignty.

No doubt some elements in this account reflect the aim of a good story rather than that of historical accuracy. Still, there is good reason to consider Chanakya, the Brahmin minister to Chandragupta Maurya, as a real historical personage. Chanakya also became the model of a masterful practitioner of behind-the-scenes statecraft. In later literature Chanakya was the apocryphal speaker of shrewd aphorisms concerned with royal strategy and worldly affairs. A large corpus of *subhashita* literature ("well-spoken" proverbs and maxims) was attributed to Chanakya.[21] And more significantly, Chanakya came to be identified with

Kautilya, author of the *Arthashastra*, the preeminent classical Indic work on statecraft.

Kautilya's *Arthashastra* is a large, erudite, and comprehensive treatise (*shastra*) aimed at worldly success (*artha*), a detailed self-help book meant for kings and ministers. In one passage, the author identifies himself with the Brahmin minister Chanakya: "The man who out of indignation quickly rescued the treatise (shastra) and the weapon (shastra), as also the land that had fallen into the hands of the Nandas, it is he who composed this treatise" (ASh 15.1.73). Although this is most likely an interpolation, it points to a continuity. The primary contents of the *Arthashastra* as we have it date from a later period, during the Kushana Era. But the heart of the text conveys a prescriptive and pragmatic vision of royal statecraft, aimed at an ambitious expanding kingdom. This accords well with the early state-building efforts of the Mauryan kingdom under Chandragupta and Chanakya.[22]

Kautilya's *Arthashastra* takes for granted a monarchical form of government and addresses itself to a king who will learn from it the science of politics, or Artha. The Sanskrit term Artha has numerous meanings, but in this treatise it denotes success in worldly affairs leading to wealth and power. The aim of the king is to assure, through the practice of Artha, full power for himself and orderly maintenance of life for those living within the kingdom. To maintain order, politics requires the application of physical force, which Kautilya refers to as *danda*, the "rod." Without the royal use of force in society, *matsyanyaya*, or anarchy, will ensue. Through appropriate application of the rod, the king keeps all members of the social order in their proper places. Kautilya envisions the king as the central agent in a state apparatus designed to maintain order and to extend his sovereign will. Since the monarch exercises unitary authority, Kautilya emphasizes the importance of both internal and external restraints on the king to prevent risky or oppressive royal conduct. And he urges the king to use great care in choosing trustworthy ministers (*mantrin*) who can counsel and guide his conduct. In this capacity we can imagine Chanakya and Kautilya setting out their own important duties in the governance of this imagined polity.

The *Arthashastra* envisions not a large empire, but a small ambitious kingdom. In addition to maintaining order within the kingdom, the king should also seek to expand his territories through conquest of neighboring states. Kautilya takes it for granted that a king will desire to conquer others. This will add to the wealth and security of the kingdom. Effective statecraft requires realistic and prudent evaluation of opportunities and dangers. Kautilya therefore sets out basic principles by which a king can assess his own strengths and those of his opponents and allies.

What Kautilya leaves out of the *Arthashastra* is just as important as what he includes. Notably, he does not recognize any overarching divine order. Gods and temples may exist, but Kautilya regards them simply as social realities. The king is not the agent of a supervening divinity. He does not receive the mantle of rule from the gods. He is autonomous. Kautilya does not greatly concern himself with the old Vedic royal sacrifices like the Rajasuya and the Ashvamedha. The king does employ Brahmins in a ministerial capacity, and they should be learned in the Vedas, but their primary role is to provide wise counsel. The king collects taxes, but there is no dramatic procession of tribute bearers, as among the Achaemenids. In short, the dignified part of the king's constitution is not important in Kautilya's *Arthashastra*. The science of Artha involves the pragmatic use of the king's ruling authority to maintain and grow the resources of the state. In Kautilya's vision, this is the effective way to create the good society.

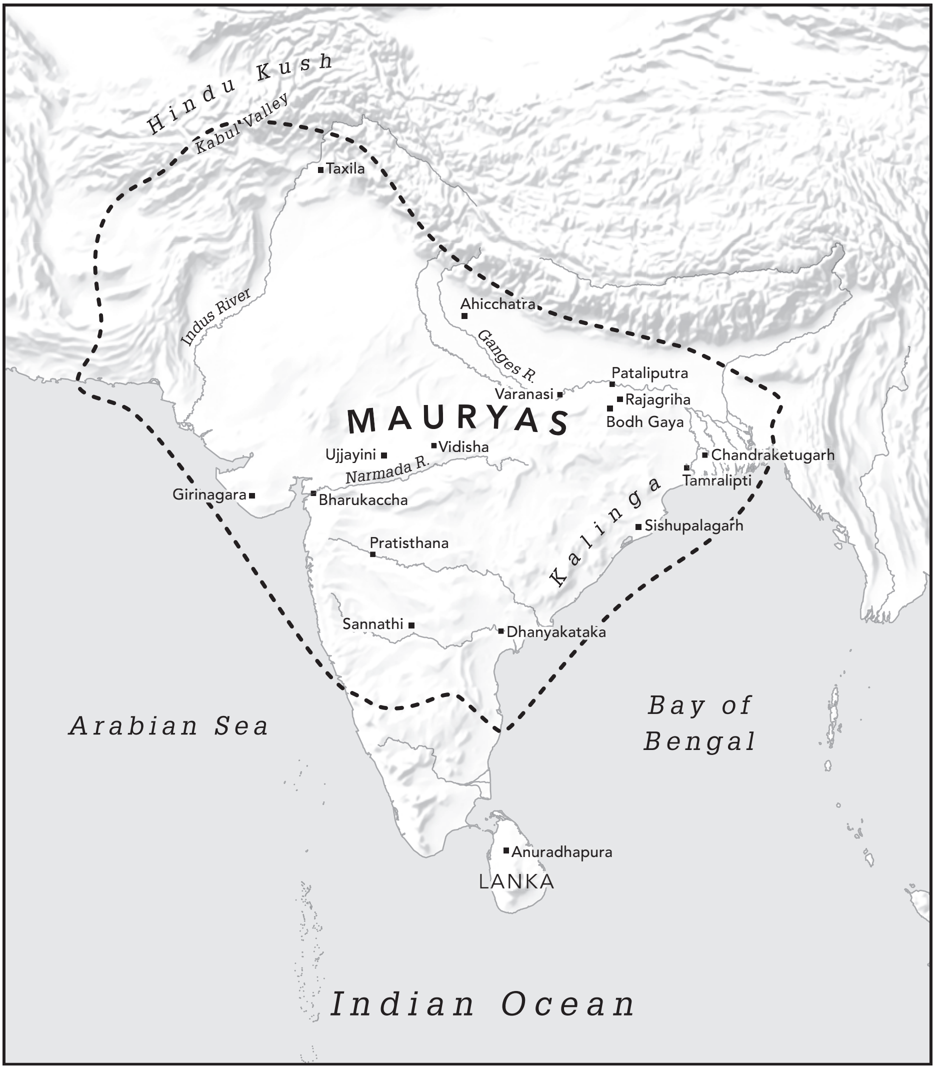
It is not possible to determine how fully Chandragupta and his minister adhered to the prescriptive advice for an ambitious kingdom set out in Kautilya's *Arthashastra*. But it is clear that the Mauryan state under Chandragupta's rule established itself as a powerful expansive kingdom with a growing administrative structure. Chandragupta handed over the throne to his son Bindusara around 297 BCE. According to later Jain sources, the retired king then joined the Jain order and traveled south with the teacher Bhadrabahu, to Shravana Belgola near Mysore in Karnataka. Bindusara ruled for about twenty-five years. During his reign the Mauryans extended their control farther to the south.

In 273 BCE Bindusara's son Ashoka Maurya became king. He would rule for over four decades, until 232 BCE. Under Ashoka, the Mauryan kingdom reached its greatest territorial control. The Mauryans controlled the two great river systems of the north, the Indus and the Ganges-Yamuna. Across the north, its dominion extended from the Hindu Kush range in the west to the Bengal delta in the east. Mauryan rule also penetrated into the South Asian peninsula, from the Arabian Sea to the Bay of Bengal, as far south as the modern states of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. In effect the Mauryan empire under Ashoka encompassed the entire South Asian subcontinent, except the southernmost tip (**Map 8**).

The Mauryans as an Empire

When does a kingdom become an empire? What does it mean to call the Mauryan state under Ashoka an empire?

The term "empire" comes from the Latin verb *imperare*, to command. An empire (or *imperium*), accordingly, refers to a central sovereign command or



MAP 8. India in the Mauryan Era

authority that extends its dominion over an extensive territory. Through conquest, an empire's domain comes to encompass peoples and groups who are culturally distinct from the center—communities that speak different languages, follow different social codes, or worship different gods. The Achaemenids offer the first clear example of empire in early world history, followed by the Han

Chinese and the Romans. We can view the Mauryans as members of this select club of early world empires.

The Mauryans certainly exercised some degree of independent authority over a wide geographical territory. They ruled over a tremendous array of culturally distinct groups. But this dominion was not uniform. In a careful reconsideration of the Mauryan empire, historian Romila Thapar suggests another way of thinking about an empire.[23] An empire is, she proposes, a complex form of state including differentiated political and economic systems. These would include a metropolitan center, secondary core areas, and a large number of peripheral areas. For the Mauryans, the metropolitan center was the fertile Magadha region, along the Ganges, with the capital of Pataliputra grown into an enormous urban center. It stretched some nine miles along the river, according to the Greek ambassador Megasthenes, and its massive fortifications extended twenty-two miles around the city. Archeologists estimate the population to have been around 400,000, certainly one of the largest cities in the world at this time.[24] The Mauryans exercised direct control throughout the rich Ganges-Yamuna basin. Secondary core areas would have included the Gandhara region around Taxila in the northwest, the Malwa-Avanti region with the growing cities of Vidisha and Ujjayini, important coastal areas and trade ports of Gujarat on the Arabian Sea and the east coast along the Bay of Bengal, and the Krishna-Godavari River areas of the Deccan Plateau. These secondary areas formed provinces within the Mauryan administration. Finally, in between these agrarian zones, the Mauryans exercised less direct control over peripheral areas. These might include nonagricultural communities occupying upland regions, referred to as "forest peoples" (*atavika*), who had limited contact with the state. These groups supplied valuable forest products, most notably elephants and their trainers.

Empires are not egalitarian states. Core regions and peripheral ones are not equal. The imperial center generally extracts resources from the outer parts of the empire through taxes and trade. Capitals like Pataliputra may grow immense and affluent by consolidating the surplus wealth of territories under its control. An empire uses authorities dispatched from the center, or else works with local elite collaborators in the peripheries, to carry out its administrative tasks, the efficient part of its state activity.

Empires often present some broader, more universal vision meant to create unity among its far-flung parts. Here is where Bagehot's "dignified" part of an imperial constitution comes in. This may take the form of a shared affiliation to an overarching deity or to some universal principle, like the order-making Achaemenid deity Ahura Mazda. Or it could be a collective enterprise, such as a "civilizing mission." James Laine refers to such broad principles or visions as "meta-religions." These ideologies stand above particular religions within a society and serve as a basis for evaluating and including these contending religions within a higher order. In a large and heterogeneous polity, he writes, it is important to "articulate an encompassing ideology that can stand above the multiple religions of cosmopolitan societies."[25] Ruling over the vast territories of the Mauryan empire, Ashoka sought to proclaim such an encompassing ideology through the concept of Dharma.

Ashoka and the Dharma of Empire

> In the eighth year after his royal consecration, King Ashoka, beloved of the gods, conquered the land of the Kalingas. One hundred fifty thousand people were captured. One hundred thousand were killed there, and many times that number died. Ever since the land of the Kalingas was obtained, Ashoka has become devoted to intense study of Dharma, to love of Dharma, and to the spread of Dharma. After conquering Kalinga, Ashoka now feels remorse. For all the slaughter, death, and seizure of people that results from conquering an unconquered country, Ashoka now feels deep distress and sorrow (SI 34–38).[26]

Ashoka began his rule in 273 BCE and had a royal consecration (*abhisheka*) performed four years later, in 269 BCE. Continuing the Mauryan policy of territorial expansion, Ashoka waged a large campaign in 261 BCE to subdue the eastern regions of Kalinga (modern Odisha state). The Mauryan forces were victorious, but the cataclysmic battle affected Ashoka deeply. By his own account, chiseled into rock, the slaughter of soldiers and the enslavement of captives have only brought him grief. And he is distressed not only by the soldiers directly affected. Ashoka reflects on the harm and disruption that war brings to innocent victims and to all those relatives and friends who felt affection for the victims. The bitter fruits of war spread out to all humans, Ashoka continues, and this causes him deep remorse. We might call this "moral injury." Buddhists would say that the Kalinga War brought Ashoka face to face with *duhkha*, or suffering, the first of the Buddha's noble truths.

As a result, Ashoka became devoted to the study and spreading of Dharma. In other inscriptions the ruler explains that not long after the Kalinga campaign he became a Buddhist lay follower (*upasaka*).

> King Ashoka, beloved of the gods, says this: I have been an *upasaka* now for more than two and a half years. But for the first year I did not make much of an effort. However, for the past year I have been closely associated with the Buddhist order, and I have made a strong effort. During this time, people who were not previously connected with the gods have now become connected with them. This is the result of my effort. (SI 50–52)

Ashoka speaks with the zeal of a recent convert, and he seeks to enlist everyone, rich and poor alike, in this effort.

> And this is not just for the elite; even poor people can gain the highest heaven through this effort. It is just for this reason that I have made this announcement: so that the poor and the wealthy should make this effort, so that others outside the kingdom should know about it, so that this effort should continue for a long time, and so that it should grow a lot, at least one and a half times. I have made this announcement on the 256th day of my tour outside the capital.

Ashoka wanted his message to be heard. He had it proclaimed aloud and also had it engraved on a polished rock face, so that the announcement could last "for a long time." In this case, the message was delivered in Erragudi, in modern Andhra Pradesh state, while Ashoka was touring the southern boundaries of the Mauryan territory. The same message was etched in numerous other locations in the empire.

Ashoka's remorse after Kalinga and his involvement with the Buddhist order would have profound effects on the Mauryan state. A new imperial policy would grow out of Ashoka's efforts to understand and to spread Dharma. The resulting policy would have direct and dramatic effects on the Buddhist order and on other religious communities within the empire.

The Study of Dharma

Ashoka Maurya left behind dozens of long-lasting announcements, etched into rock, throughout the imperial territories. In all of them, one word appears with striking frequency: Dharma. But what did Ashoka mean by Dharma? The word is one of the key terms in classical Indian discourse, and no single definition will suffice. Indeed, Dharma was too important to be left uncontested. Different speakers and communities would use the shared term in distinctive ways.[27]

The word *dharma* comes from a Sanskrit verb-root, *dhri*, which means to support or to maintain. (It derives from the same Indo-European base as do the English words "firm" and "firmament.") Dharma first appears in the *Rig Veda*, where its basic meaning is "foundation." In this earliest Vedic usage, Dharma can refer to the foundation of the world, of the gods, of human society, or of a moral order. Later Vedic literature applies the word Dharma primarily to the domain of kingship. There, Dharma is understood to be a power that supports the king, a ruling force. In the large Vedic corpus, however, Dharma is never a central term of discourse.

It is the Shramana communities who first begin to use the word Dharma more widely. In the Shramana lexicon, Dharma comes to refer to the distinctive religious perspectives of founders or teachers. There can be multiple Dharmas. In one early Buddhist sutra, a group of local villagers complains to the Buddha Shakyamuni about the many Brahmin and Shramana teachers who pass through.[28] All of them, they say, proclaim their own views and curse, revile, and reject the teachings of all the others. The Buddha suggests they evaluate each of these Dharmas for themselves, and he recommends that they adopt criteria. Are they beneficial or not? Are they flawless or full of errors? Are they praised by wise people or censured? When acted upon as instructions for conduct, do they lead to harm and suffering, or to well-being and happiness? Some Dharmas are better than others. This being a Buddhist text, of course it is the Buddha's own Dharma that is shown to meet all these criteria most fully.

Of all the new Shramana groups, the Buddhists embrace the word Dharma most fully. The Buddha Shakyamuni acknowledges the Dharmas of the teachers with whom he studied prior to his enlightenment, but then when he first conveys his own post-enlightenment teachings to an audience of five ascetics, he "sets in motion the wheel of Dharma." The new Dharma of the Buddha, he affirms, supplants any previous Dharmas they may have known. The Buddhist community identifies Dharma as one of its three "jewels," in which all Buddhists take refuge: the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha (or community of Buddhist followers). When the Buddha is dying and his mendicant followers face the prospect of continuing without an authoritative leader, he recommends that they take Dharma as their authority. The Buddha says to his attendant, "Ananda, it may be that you will think: 'The teacher's instruction has ceased, now we have no teacher!' It should not be seen like this, Ananda, for what I have taught and explained to you as Dharma and discipline will, at my passing, be your teacher" (MPNS 6.1). Dharma corresponds here to the words of the Buddha (*buddha-vachana*), which his followers believe provide a uniquely accurate and efficacious analysis of the world and how best to act within it.

By the Mauryan period, Brahmins loyal to the Vedic tradition were using Dharma as a key term in articulating their own code of proper conduct and their vision of a well-ordered society. They began to set these forth in new textual supplements to the Vedic corpus they called Dharmasutras. These Brahmin codes of Dharma—we will see in the next chapter—differed dramatically from the Buddha's version of Dharma. During this period, too, Vedic Brahmins who were developing the discipline of Vedic hermeneutics, called Mimamsa ("investigation"), began to employ the term Dharma to denote the injunctions within Vedic texts that require specific sacrificial actions. Within this intellectual discipline, Dharma is simply a matter of correct ritual performance.

So, in his intense study of Dharma, Ashoka had many possible meanings to choose from. And he drew on many. As ruler of all, Ashoka's presentation of Dharma sought to appeal broadly to widely shared understandings.

In some of his inscriptions, Ashoka poses a rhetorical question and then proceeds to answer it. "King Ashoka, beloved of the gods, says this: Dharma is excellent. But what is this Dharma made of? It consists in committing few sins and doing many good deeds, in acting with compassion, generosity, truthfulness, and purity" (SI 54–55). Elsewhere, he sets out a similar set of pious principles. "One should obey one's mother and father, and one should also obey one's elders. One should show compassion to all living beings. One should speak truthfully. One should follow these principles of Dharma" (SI 52). Dharma appears here as a broad social ethics, a simple code of conduct for all. These ethical ideas Ashoka could have learned as a Buddhist lay follower. They correspond to the kind of teachings the Buddha Shakyamuni directed at his lay audiences. But Vedic Brahmins, Jains, and many other teachers would have affirmed similar codes. Even the Hellenistic Greeks living in the northwestern parts of the empire would have agreed. When Ashoka had his pronouncements translated into Greek in those regions, Dharma was rendered as *eusebeia*, or virtue.

The aim of this Dharma was to create a harmonious social order. Ashoka makes his Dharma-pronouncements so that people will give up their previous ways of life and embrace the principles of Dharma. He sees this as the way to bring the greatest happiness (*sukha*) to the people. And this, he adds, applies to everyone: to those in the capital and those far away from it, to all classes, and to all religious communities (SI 61–62). For Ashoka, Dharma is a universal ethic.

In Ashoka's view, this Dharma is transformative. We see this most clearly in his use of Dharma in compounds: Dharma-gift, Dharma-tour, Dharma-conquest, and others. He proposes, for example, a new kind of ceremony, namely a ceremony of Dharma.

> People perform various auspicious ceremonies (*mangala*). At times of illness, marriage, the birth of children, departure on a journey—on these and other occasions, people perform many ceremonies . . . Certainly ceremonies should be done. But these ceremonies bear little fruit. By contrast, the ceremony of Dharma (*dharma-mangala*) bears great fruit. Fair treatment of slaves and servants, respect toward elders, restraint from violence toward all living creatures, and generosity toward Shramanas and Brahmins—these and other similar actions are called the ceremonies of Dharma. (SI 28–29)

For the individual, ordinary rituals are doubtful in their effects and limited to the present world, he asserts. Ceremonies of Dharma, however, bear good results in this world and unlimited merit in the next world. Collectively, he avers, the widespread promulgation of Dharma is changing all Mauryan society for the better. Previously, Ashoka claims, the gods had no relations with humans, but now they are mingling with humans (SI 49). When he speaks of the gods, Ashoka never names any particular deities. He is no theist. Instead, he indicates here that all the gods that people in the empire may be worshipping have, thanks to this society-wide adherence to Dharma, become more accessible or present on earth.

Ashoka's contrite response to the Kalinga War and his ensuing love of Dharma also led to a shift in the expansionist policies of the Mauryan state. He used another Dharma-compound to announce this. No longer will Ashoka engage in ordinary military conquest (*vijaya*); now he will pursue Dharma-conquest. This does not require Mauryan armies. The beating of war drums will be replaced by the call to Dharma. For Ashoka, Dharma is a conquering idea that oversteps political boundaries. For this reason, he claims that he seeks to achieve a Dharma-conquest not only within the Mauryan dominion, but also among peoples beyond the borders of the empire. He claims to have proclaimed this message of Dharma both to the small chieftain-ruled states in the far south of the subcontinent and also to the Hellenistic kingdoms to the west, as far away as Macedonia and Egypt (SI 34–38).[29]

The Spread of Dharma

Ashoka was eager to spread his new conception of Dharma as a universal and transformative force. As an energetic ruler of a powerful state, he enjoyed ample resources to do so. But it would also require innovative practices, and here Ashoka drew inspiration especially from the Achaemenids.

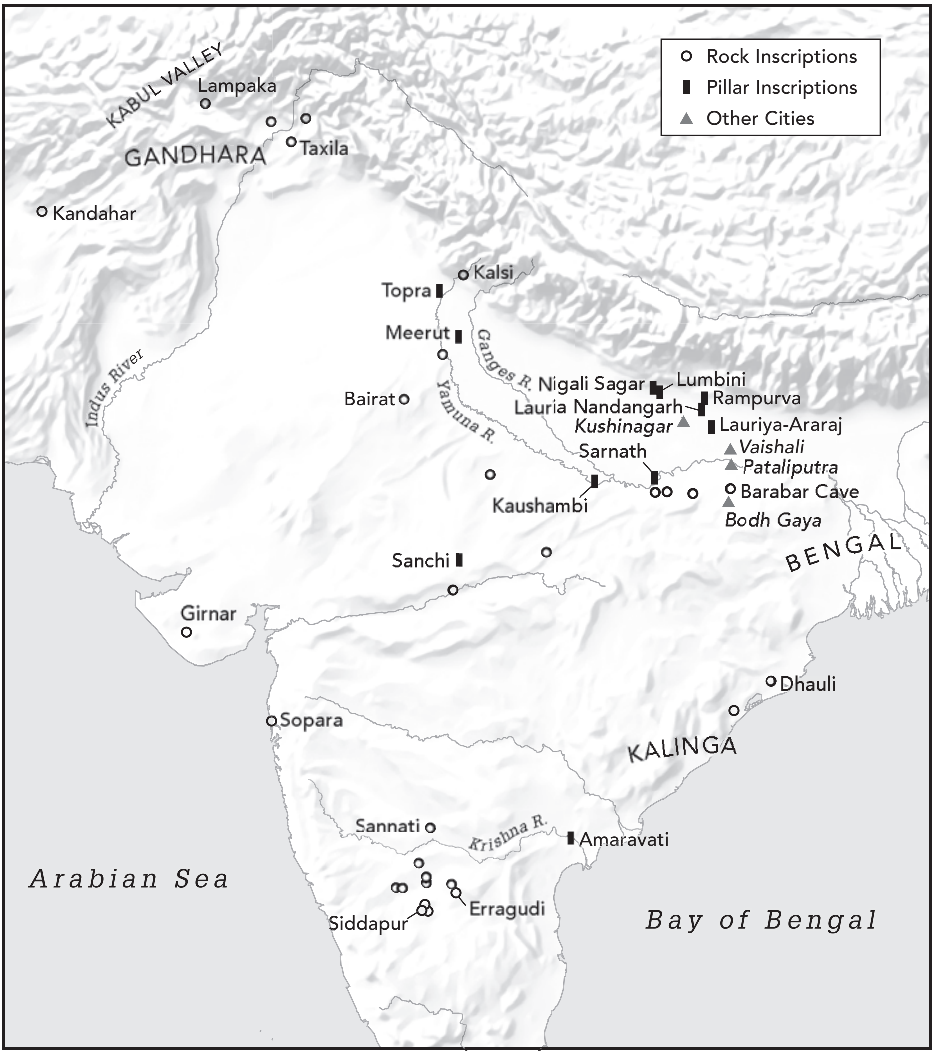
In one inscription, Ashoka poses himself a question. How can people be induced to follow Dharma? He responds:

> This idea came to me: I will issue proclamations and instructions on Dharma. When they hear these, the people will follow Dharma. They will be elevated, and become greater through the growth of Dharma . . . And for this very reason, I have set up Dharma-pillars, and appointed Dharma-officers, and issued Dharma-proclamations. (SI 62–66)

Ashoka would issue his proclamations concerning Dharma either from the capital or while he was touring within the empire. Each proclamation would be transmitted in written form to local officials, who would make arrangements for public recitation of the imperial statement. Then the message would be engraved on an appropriate rock-surface. In another inscription, Ashoka orders that proclamations be recited aloud at least every four months. Ashoka intends his Dharma-proclamations to be heard broadly by the local population and to last for a long time. It is thanks to this intention that we are able to read them now and reimagine his vision for an ethical society based on Dharma, some twenty-three centuries later.

Writing had been introduced into South Asia several centuries earlier, but Ashoka was the first ruler in the subcontinent to have royal statements inscribed in a permanent medium. The Achaemenids had done so, and no doubt Ashoka drew on their precedent, while infusing his proclamations with his own distinctive ideas. The messages were conveyed not in sacerdotal Sanskrit, but in vernacular languages—most often Prakrit, but with a few translated into Greek and Aramaic in the northwestern regions. These rock-cut proclamations of Ashoka were engraved throughout the Mauryan dominion. They were especially common at the outer boundaries of the empire—the southern borders in Andhra and Karnataka, the northwestern regions of Gandhara (in modern-day Pakistan) and Kandahar (in Afghanistan), Kalinga on the eastern coast, Gujarat on the west coast, and Kalsi in the northern Himalayan foothills (**Map 9**). It was as if Ashoka were etching the full extent of the Mauryan empire onto the landscape.

Ashoka also erected stone columns to spread his Dharma. These Dharma-pillars are impressive monolithic shafts topped with animal capitals that jut forty or more feet up from the earth. Here, too, Ashoka adapted an Achaemenid precedent and recast it for his own purposes. Archeologists have identified at least fifteen Ashokan pillars, and originally there would have been many more. Most were located in the Mauryan heartland, but several were farther afield, as in Sanchi and Topra. Some have been toppled. Some, like the one at Sarnath, have been broken into pieces, and some have been uprooted and moved to new



MAP 9. Pillars and Rock Inscriptions of Ashoka Maurya

locations. From two pillars that once stood in Rampurva, a massive stone lion capital now sits at the entrance to the Indian Museum in Kolkata (**Fig. 8**). An equally impressive bull capital occupies the forecourt entryway at the Rashtrapati Bhavan in New Delhi, the official residence of the president of India.

A few pillars survive intact and upright in their original locations. The best preserved Dharma-pillar is at Lauriya-Nandangarh, along the old route between Pataliputra and Nepal (**Fig. 9**). Here, the gently tapered polished sandstone

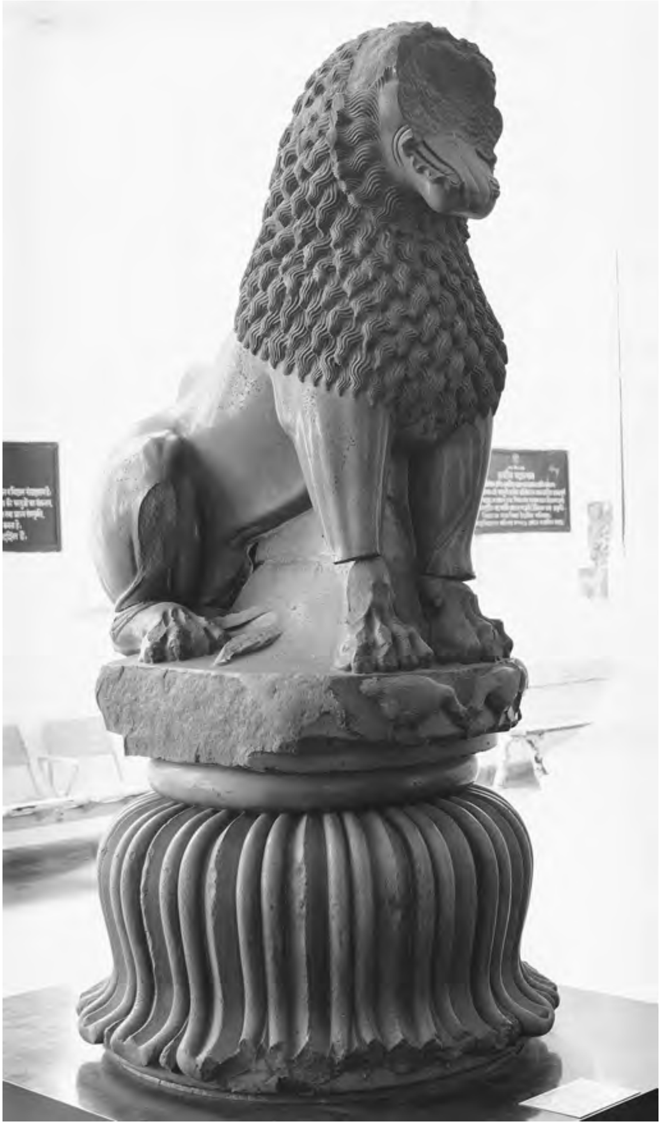


FIGURE 8. Rampurva Lion Capital, 3rd century BCE. Indian Museum, Kolkata.

cylinder rises forty-one feet from the ground. It extends another nine feet into the ground. Atop the pillar, the capital extends another seven feet in height. A single lion sits atop a round abacus, on which a parade of geese process clockwise. The abacus rests on a "Persepolitan-type" bell, which has been Indianized into the shape of an inverted lotus bud. (Lotuses in various forms are ubiquitous

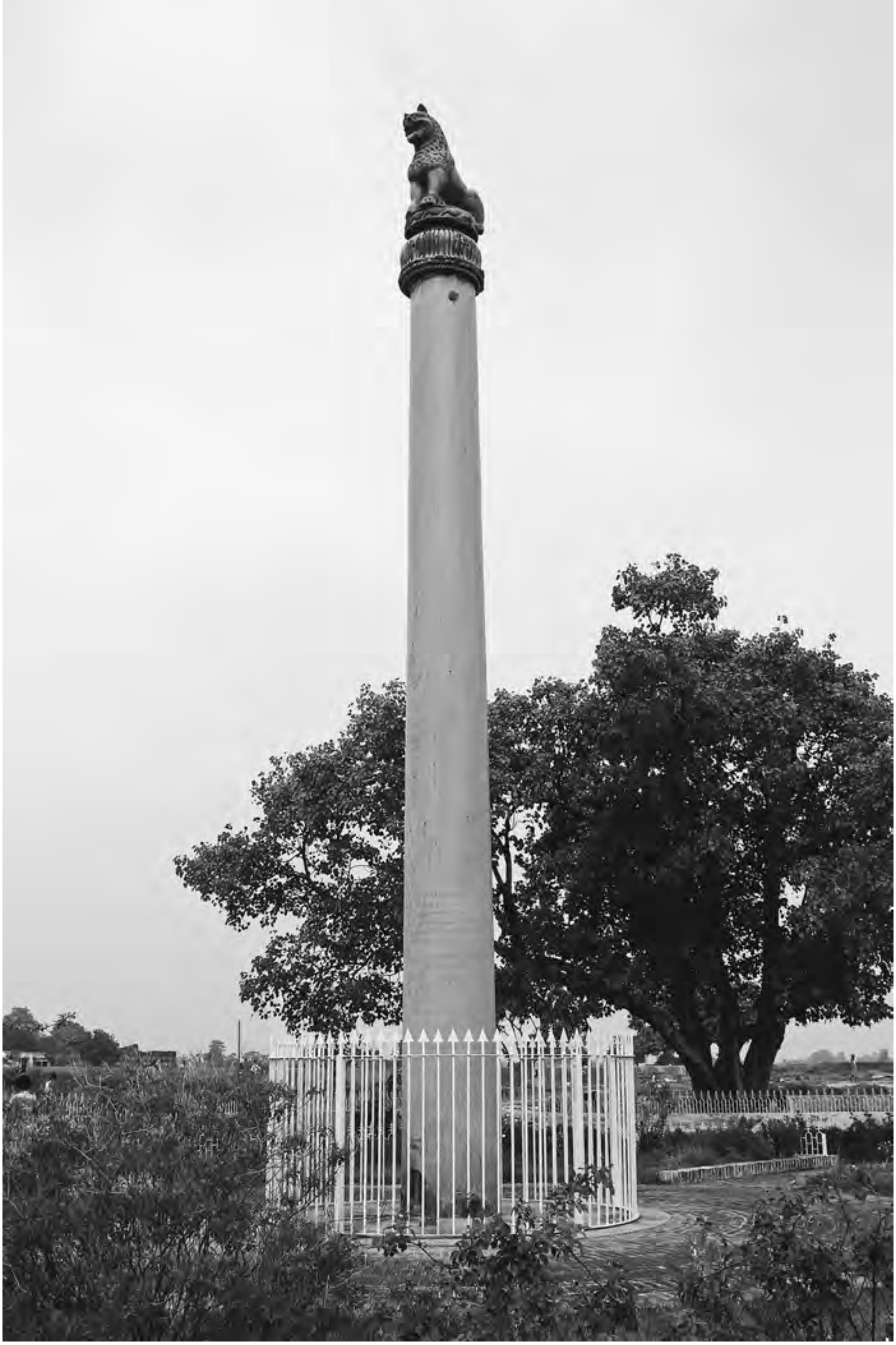


FIGURE 9. Ashokan Pillar, 3rd century BCE. Lauriya-Nandangarh, Bihar. Photo by Frederick M. Asher. Courtesy of the Center for Art and Archaeology of the American Institute of Indian Studies.

in Indian art.) Inscribed onto the shaft, at around eye-level, is a Dharma-proclamation in clear Brahmi characters.

The Dharma-pillars proclaim Ashoka's message in several ways. Their sculpted sophistication and looming presence make a powerful visual impression, as the Sarnath pillar did on the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang. To shape, transport, and erect these monolithic columns, weighing around fifty tons, topped with capitals of another two tons, was a remarkable feat of third-century BCE engineering. They made evident the resources the Mauryan state was able to mobilize. And most of Ashoka's pillars contain his Dharma-proclamations, available to be read by the literate and periodically declaimed by his Dharma-officers.

Ashoka appointed a new class of royal emissaries, whom he called *Dharma-mahamatras*, or Dharma-officers. These ministers appear to have been distinct from other administrators in the Mauryan bureaucracy, with no responsibility for law enforcement or tax collection. Rather, their task was to expound and disseminate the Dharma, as Ashoka understood it. In this capacity, they exercised a supervisory role in the reciting and transcribing of Ashoka's Dharma-proclamations, and they interacted with the various religious communities of the empire.

Finally, Ashoka sought to spread his Dharma teachings through his own travels. Effective rulers must tour their dominions to enforce their authority over its territories. But Ashoka redefined the royal tour as an opportunity for moral instruction.

> In earlier times, kings used to go out on pleasure-tours. During these tours they would hunt animals and engage in other such pleasurable activities. But in the tenth year after his royal consecration, King Ashoka, Beloved of the Gods, went to Sambodhi (Bodh Gaya). From that time on, his tours have become Dharma-tours. (SI 27)

The idea for this new kind of tour, Ashoka observes, had come during his visit to the place of the Buddha's enlightenment. He goes on to describe the program for these royal Dharma-tours.

> On these tours, Ashoka visits and makes gifts to Brahmins and Shramanas. He visits and makes arrangements for support of the elderly. He visits and instructs the people in the countryside in Dharma, and he investigates the Dharma and how it may be applied. These activities bring the greatest pleasure to King Ashoka, Beloved of the Gods. Other pleasures are inferior to this.

For Ashoka, a powerful vision of a harmonious social and political order governed by his own conception of Dharma inspired a series of innovations—inscriptions, pillars, special officers, and moral tours—aimed at bringing this vision into reality. And the effort to do so, Ashoka reports, has brought him the greatest pleasure.

Ashoka saw his Dharma as extending even to those "forest people" who dwell within the imperial borders but remain outside the prevailing Indo-Aryan social order.

> As for those forest dwellers who live in areas conquered by Ashoka, beloved of the gods: he entreats them and reminds them of their proper conduct.

Despite his conversion to nonviolence, Ashoka here reserves the ruler's rod of punishment.

> Even though he has repented, he reminds them that Ashoka still possesses the force of rule. So they should turn away from their misdeeds and avoid being killed. For Ashoka desires that all beings experience security, self-control, impartiality, and joy. (SI 38)

The threat of state violence here, exercised to discipline communities on the margins of Indo-Aryan society, is the other side of Ashoka's project to bring the benefits of Dharma to all beings.

While it may have been instigated by Buddhist lay teachings, Ashoka's Dharma did not coincide with the renunciatory thrust in much of the Buddha's Dharma. Ashoka says little about Nirvana and nothing about the higher Buddhist teachings like no-soul or conditioned origination. For Ashoka, Dharma was central to the dignified aspect of the Mauryan constitution, meant to articulate a moral vision of the good society, under the guidance of a wise paternal ruler. As Laine puts it, Ashoka's Dharma was "a meta-religion that serves as a guide for adjudicating the value of the numerous traditions that might contribute to the peace of the realm."[30]

Religious Communities in Ashoka's India

Within the extensive Mauryan empire, Ashoka recognized that there were many religious communities that subscribed to different doctrines and pursued divergent practices. In his epigraphs, he uses a nonspecific term, *parshada* (member of a group or assembly) to designate groups of religious specialists. These religious orders include both renouncers, like the Shramana groups, and householders, like the Vedic Brahmins. He also uses the paired terms *brahmana-shramana* to point to the two main categories of religious practitioners in Mauryan society.

Ashoka states that he is eager to have all religious communities living throughout the Mauryan territories. All of them, he believes, contribute to the social good by pursuing the commendable goals of self-mastery and purity of mind. He emphasizes that he honors all of them with tokens of respect and gifts of support. He adopts an inclusive religious policy. From Ashoka's time on, it would become a common pattern for Indic rulers to acknowledge and patronize multiple religious groups within their territories. Ashoka carried out some of this broad support personally, and he also entrusted the task to his Dharma-officers.

> As for the Dharma-officers, I have employed them to occupy themselves in a variety of matters, on behalf of both renouncers and householders. They are employed for all religious communities. Some will be assigned, by my order, to the affairs of the Buddhist community. Some will be assigned, by my order, to the affairs of the Brahmins and the Ajivakas. Some will be assigned, by my order, to the affairs of the Jains. Some will be assigned, by my order, to various other religious groups. Thus, the Dharma-officers will be assigned variously to these and all other religious communities. (SI 62–66)

While he recognized and supported a plurality of religious groups, Ashoka made it clear that, for him, his own Dharma held a special priority. In one inscription he sets forth his view. He has shown respect to all groups, both renouncers and householders, but what he values most is "growth in the essence (*sara*) of Dharma" (SI 32–34). The term "sara" designates the core, pith, marrow, the inner strength of something. All religions are valuable, then, insofar as they contribute to the core or marrow of Ashoka's Dharma. He goes on: "Growth in the essence of Dharma may take many forms, but the root of them all is restraint in speech." Those who loudly promote their own spiritual truths and disparage those of others are only injuring their own community through their divisiveness. Instead, Ashoka recommends, they should listen respectfully and learn the teachings of other groups. In the third century BCE, Ashoka is one of the first recorded advocates of interfaith dialogue and the comparative study of religion. This open-minded inquiry, he concludes, will bring about a growth in one's own religion and a brightening of the Dharma.

Inclusiveness and liberal patronage does not necessarily mean a lack of discrimination. Ashoka's religious policies held profound consequences for two important communities in Mauryan India: the Vedic Brahmins and the Buddhist order.

In the fourth year of his reign, Ashoka underwent a royal consecration (abhisheka), presumably conducted by Brahmin priests along lines spelled out in the Vedas. Such a major public ceremony would have involved sacrificial slaughter of animals. But a few years later, with his grief-stricken reflections after the Kalinga War and his subsequent commitment to the Buddhist Sangha, Ashoka adopted a new value. Shramana groups like the Jains and Buddhists advocated a policy of nonharming (ahimsa), and Ashoka took this as one of the key tenets in his understanding of Dharma. This newfound commitment would alter the Mauryan military policies from pursuing conquest to pursuing Dharma-conquest. It also had an effect on the royal kitchens. Previously, says Ashoka in one epigraph, many hundreds of thousands of creatures were butchered every day to cook sauces for the king's meals. But now, he reports, only three living beings are being slaughtered—two birds and one animal. "And even those three will not be butchered in the future" (SI 15–16). Ashoka has almost gone vegetarian, and he vows to do so fully any day now.

So, too, with the grand sacrificial ceremonies prescribed by the Vedas. Ashoka states that he sees great evil in such ceremonies. Therefore, he issued an order that no living creature should be slaughtered in sacrifice. We cannot be certain just how widely Ashoka's ban on animal sacrifice was enforced. But it is clear that, as long as Ashoka held sway, Brahmins were no longer welcome to perform large Vedic animal sacrifices in public. Ashoka had displaced Vedic sacrifice and its priests from the ritual center of the realm.

Ashoka's ban had widespread ramifications. The Vedas did not disappear, and large-scale Vedic royal sacrifices like the Ashvamedha would again be performed by rulers in post-Mauryan times. However, new genres of ritual literature made clear that many Brahmins loyal to the Vedic tradition shifted their attention inward. In the Grihyasutras, they outlined programs of domestic rites not requiring violence. In the Dharmasutras, they articulated their own treatises on Dharma—but a Dharma that would center on the everyday activities of male Brahmin householders. They began to portray themselves as a disciplinary community, in unstated competition with the Buddhist Sangha and other Shramana renunciatory communities, as we will see in the next chapter. And bardic storytellers began to form the great Sanskrit epic texts, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, to offer an alternative to Ashoka's innovations with their own conception of Dharma, their own vision of a good society and well-run state, and a renewed form of theism.

As for the Buddhist order, the special considerations it received in Mauryan times would transform it from one among many renunciatory groups in northern India into an imperial religious formation, eventually expanding throughout Asia. Ashoka Maurya, Buddhist lay follower, was especially eager to preserve the unity of the Sangha and to support enterprises and institutions that would help promote the Buddhist teachings beyond the community of mendicant monks and nuns. During his rule, the Sangha sent out missionaries throughout the empire and beyond to establish new monastic groups. Ashoka himself visited the places most important in the life and career of the Buddha and helped establish pilgrimage as a practice for both mendicants and laity. The most visible sign of Buddhist expansion during Ashoka's rule, however, was the proliferation of burial mounds containing the relics of the Buddha Shakyamuni, known as *stupas*.

Buddhism under Ashoka: An Imperial Religion

From an early period, Buddhists have taken refuge in three "jewels" fundamental to their religious order: the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. This triple refuge is reinforced regularly as part of the initiation ceremony by which one becomes a member of the Buddhist community.

From the start, his followers considered the Buddha Shakyamuni to be an enlightened teacher and a lordly person worthy of veneration. Early Buddhist texts depict an etiquette of respect that others would direct toward the person of the Buddha. They would fold their hands and bow their heads. They would burn incense and bring offerings of perfumes and flowers. Wherever the Buddha was residing became a *gandhakuti*, a "perfumed hut," from the aromatic offerings of veneration.[31] But Shakyamuni was also mortal, and his disciples had to confront his mortality.

The *Mahaparinirvana Sutra* narrates the final days of the Buddha Shakyamuni and his death at age eighty.[32] In dialogues with his faithful attendant Ananda, the Buddha addresses issues that his followers would have to face after his demise. He describes how followers should visit the places where he had lived. He tells Ananda how his corpse should be cremated and interred in a burial mound. From these recommendations would grow the Buddhist practices that maintained the living presence of the Buddha after his death and enabled this presence to expand across the South Asian landscape and beyond.

The Buddha's Expanding Body

When the Buddha reaches Kushinagara, the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra* relates, he eats a tainted meal that gives him dysentery. Facing death, he asks that his body be laid down in between two shala trees. At this point, Ananda has some pressing questions to raise while his master is still alive to answer. Up to now, he says, mendicant followers have come at the end of their rainy season retreats to see the Buddha and pay their respects to him. But when the Lord has passed away, those monks and nuns will no longer be able to do so. "Ananda," the Buddha replies, "there are four places that should bring a thrill (*samvega*) to a faithful person who sees them" (MPNS 5.8). These four, he goes on, are the places where he was born, where he attained enlightenment, where he first taught the Dharma, and where he gained final liberation upon death. In the future, he foretells, monks and nuns and male and female lay followers will all come to see these places.

The Buddha here offers one replacement for his physical presence: the places that have been rendered holy by their association with the most important events in his mortal lifetime. These would come to be known as the four *mahasthanas*, "great places," the foremost sites in a Buddhist sacred landscape. Traveling to see these places is a religious activity that is suitable and valuable not just for renunciatory monks and nuns, but also for laity. And for all pilgrims, seeing is not just believing. It will also arouse a transforming thrill, or *samvega*, an emotional experience of excitement that inspires moral and religious urgency.[33]

Ananda continues his questioning: What about the treatment of the Buddha's body after he has expired? It should be treated, replies the Buddha, much as people treat the corpse of a wheel-turning king (*chakravartin*). They carefully wrap the body in many layers of cotton cloth, soak it in an iron vat of oil, and then cremate it on a funeral pyre.[34] Then, the Buddha adds, they make a funeral mound (stupa) at a crossroads. Such stupas are suitable for four categories of beings: for great kings, for the enlightened Buddha, for Pratyeka (autonomous, nonteaching) Buddhas, and also for the Buddha's own prominent disciples.

The stupa of the Tathagata, he foretells, will be a place of veneration. "All those who place garlands or perfumes or colored unguents there, or who salute it, or who become peaceful in mind there—all of them will enjoy benefits and happiness for a long time" (MPNS 5.11). After his death, then, his followers should redirect those tokens of respect that they had given the Buddha Shakyamuni toward the stupa containing his cremated remains. And just as visiting the four great places of the Buddha's career, so, too, seeing the Buddha's stupa can evoke powerful religious emotions. When people realize that this is the stupa of the fully enlightened Lord, the Buddha tells Ananda, they will gain a serene satisfaction (*prasada*). If *samvega* points to a state of intense urgent excitement in the Buddhist emotional lexicon, *prasada* denotes a state of calm confidence, a clarity of mind. These two emotional responses, for the Buddhists, have the power to transform one's life.

The *Mahaparinirvana Sutra* goes on to relate what happens after the Buddha Shakyamuni attains final emancipation in the grove of shala trees. The advanced monks attending the Buddha respond calmly and recognize in his death the profound teaching of impermanence. The Mallas living in nearby Kushinagara are the first outsiders to be told of the Buddha's demise, and their initial reaction is one of grief and sadness. Then they do something surprising. They gather together flower garlands, perfumes, and cloth covers, they assemble the local musicians, and they go out as a group to where the Buddha's body is lying. They venerate it with dancing and singing and adorn it with flowers and incense. They put up tents so they can spend the whole day there. For six full days the Mallas honor the corpse, until on the seventh day it is cremated. Even after the incineration of the Buddha's body, the Mallas retain the relics and continue with their dancing and singing.

In their festive celebration of the Buddha's life, the Mallas pioneer a new mode of Buddhism. It is as if they are enacting physically the experience of samvega, of excitement and thrill, that the Buddha has spoken of to Ananda. This differs markedly from the renunciatory meditative style of the Buddha's monastic followers. And these improvised practices of venerative offerings and joyous celebration of the Buddha's continuing physical presence in the world, involving the full Sangha—monks and nuns as well as lay followers like the Mallas—will be key to the growth of the Buddhist order in later times.

Word of the Buddha's death gets out. Rulers from other kingdoms send messengers to stake their claims on his remains. King Ajatashatru of Magadha, the Shakyas of Kapilavastu, the Licchavis of Vaishali, and many others believe they have title to the relics. The Mallas, however, refuse to part with any of the remains. Tensions escalate. War over the valuable Buddha-relics looms. A judicious Brahmin follower, Drona, intercedes to prevent conflict.

Listen, my lords, to my one proposal.
Our Buddha always spoke of forbearance.
This battle over parts of the body
of that best of beings is not right!
Let us all, my lords, together in agreement
divide it into eight portions.
Let stupas be made widely, in all directions,
so that many people can see with their own eyes
and so gain confidence.
(MPNS 6.25)

Drona recognizes that, unlike a living body, the burnt remnants of a corpse are divisible. Moreover, this divisibility allows for broad dissemination. The assembly allows Drona to divvy up the bodily relics into eight equal parts. The recipients then return to their own capitals, erect stupas there, and hold great feasts to celebrate. As for the Brahmin Drona they award him the pot in which the remains have been collected, and he has a stupa built for that. One final group of latecomers gets the embers of the funeral pyre, and they put up a stupa too. Altogether, then, from one cremated corpse, ten stupas are born. The stupas map out the range of the Buddhist community in the small kingdoms in the Gangetic plains of north-central India. The *Mahaparinirvana Sutra* concludes its narrative: "This is how it was in olden times" (MPNS 6.27).

Archeologists, naturally, have been eager to locate the remnants of these original Buddhist stupas. But the burial mounds were simple structures of piled-up earth not conducive to long-term survival. Or else they were later covered over in brick, sometimes multiple times, to protect and expand the Buddha's posthumous corporeal presence. This is how one of the original stupas was found, at Vaishali, the ancient capital of the Licchavis. Encased within four encircling layers of brick, archeologists discovered an unassuming low mound made of packed earth and *kankar* (calcium carbonate, used to provide firmness), measuring around twenty-six feet in diameter. The original height, they estimated, had been just over eleven feet. Based on corroborating pottery finds, the mound was dated to 450–400 BCE. This modest mound, the archeologists concluded, "most probably represented ruins of the stupa which was built by the Licchavis over their share of the relics of the Buddha immediately after his death."[35] During the Mauryan period, this earthen stupa was enlarged with an enclosing shell of burnt bricks to a diameter of thirty-four feet, and a circumambulatory walkway of bricks was added. An Ashoka pillar marked the site. Later, three more enlargements were made, up through the second century CE (**Plate 4**).

The excavators also observed that there was an ancient breach, a trench cut into the innermost earth stupa. The Mauryan period brick shell and the trench bring us to the story of Ashoka and the stupas of the Buddha, for the archeologists postulated that the stupa was opened by Ashoka to retrieve the Buddha's relics for wider distribution.

Ashoka and the Veneration of the Buddha

It is not surprising that Ashoka Maurya, a lay follower commanding the abundant resources of an empire, would participate in Buddhist affairs. He especially involved himself in the practices of veneration directed toward the person of the

Buddha (or his bodily remnants) that the Buddha himself had prescribed in the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, namely pilgrimage and construction of stupas. These are practices that are open both to mendicants and to lay followers. And through his actions, he greatly expanded the scale and centrality of these venerative practices within the Buddhist religious community. We know of Ashoka's role from the material remnants of his actions and also from later narratives that present Ashoka as a paradigmatic Buddhist emperor, a veritable Dharma-Chakravartin.

In the year 249 BCE, Ashoka visited Lumbini village and left an engraved stone pillar to mark the event: "In the twentieth year after his royal consecration, King Ashoka, beloved of the gods, came here in person and honored the place, because here the Buddha Shakyamuni was born. He had a stone fence put up and directed that this stone pillar be erected" (SI 67–68) (**Fig. 10**). He visited Bodh Gaya and honored the tree under which the Buddha had sat. Later sculptural depictions of this visit, such as the remarkable relief panel on a gateway at Sanchi stupa, portray this visit as a grand celebration (**Fig. 11**). As Ashoka steps down from his elephant, musicians play flutes and drums, bearers march with banners and pots, and celestial spirits fly in to hang garlands on the expansive Bodhi tree. At the base of the tree, Ashoka left behind a lovely stone *vajrasana* ("diamond throne"), a raised flat seat of Chunar sandstone, decorated with a relief band of geese and honeysuckle. At Sarnath, Ashoka placed the pillar with the lion capital, inscribed with a message directed to the monks and nuns of the Sangha. Physical evidence shows clearly that Ashoka personally undertook a pilgrimage to the great places of the Buddha's life.

As for stupas, Ashoka both enlarged existing stupas and provided for the construction of new ones. For example, at Nigliva in modern Nepal, Ashoka had a pillar set up in 249 BCE, recording a past directive. "In the fourteenth year after his consecration, King Ashoka, beloved of the gods, directed that the stupa containing the relics of the Pratyeka Buddha Kanakamuni be doubled in size. In the twentieth year after consecration, he came here in person and honored it, and had this stone pillar erected" (SI 68).[36] "Doubling" a stupa by encasing it in a more permanent covering of burnt brick was one way to enhance the status of an existing stupa. This is what happened at Vaishali, as well as many other places.

The other way was to construct new stupas. Numerous stupa foundations, spreading far beyond the Gangetic plains, are identified as Ashokan stupas. But for new stupas, it was important to have the authentic relics of the Buddha to provide an animating presence. Here the trench in the original Vaishali earthen stupa serves as suggestive evidence. Bodily relics, we've seen, are divisible. And the story goes that Ashoka broke into most of the initial Buddha stupas, retrieved the remains, divided them into smaller—but still potent—portions, and

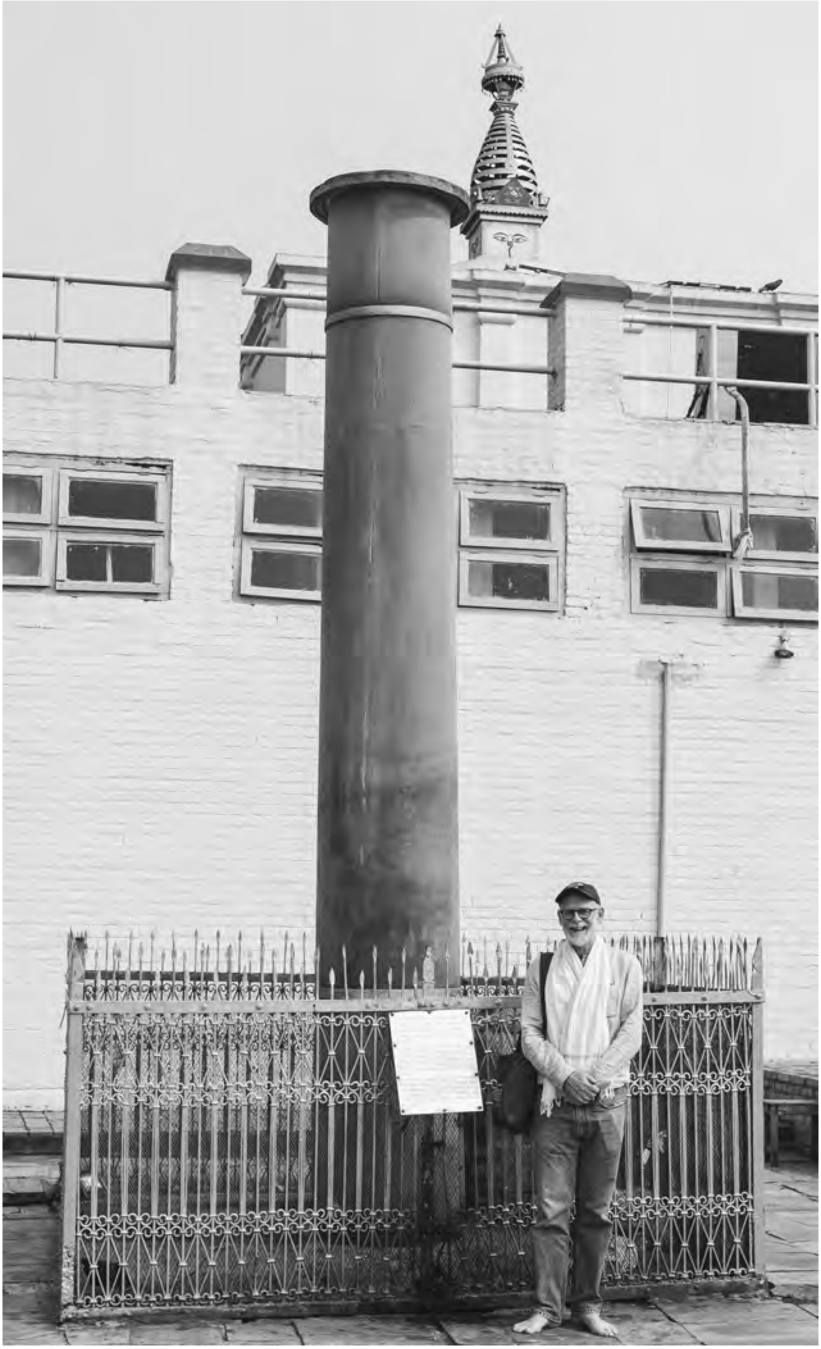


FIGURE 10. Ashokan Pillar at Lumbini, 3rd century BCE. Lumbini, Nepal. Photo by Shantum Seth.

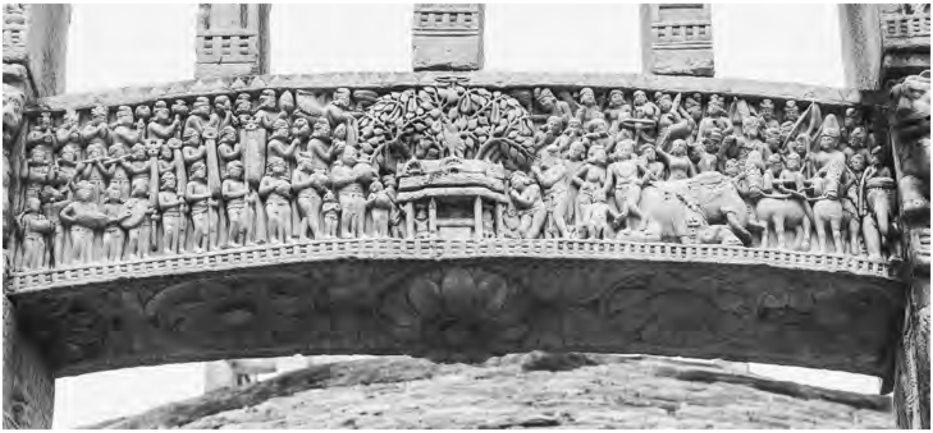


FIGURE 11. Ashoka's Visit to Bodh Gaya, relief panel on Sanchi Gateway, ca. 1st century CE. Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh. Photo by author.

then dispatched them far and wide to act as founding relics for new stupas. Here we must turn from material evidence to the narrative of a later Sanskrit text, the *Ashokavadana*, or "religious deeds of Ashoka."

The *Ashokavadana* is a Buddhist conversion story.[37] It celebrates both the saving power of Buddhism and the religious deeds of Ashoka Maurya. Completed a few centuries after Ashoka's lifetime, the work relates how the Mauryan ruler is transformed from a fierce and violent ruler into an exemplary Buddhist king. As a Buddhist lay supporter, Ashoka then constructs a great multitude of stupas and makes a grand pilgrimage to see all the places of the Buddha's life. These episodes of legendary Ashoka, exaggerated as they may have become in the retelling, rest on real actions taken by the historical Ashoka.

Soon after his conversion, the *Ashokavadana* relates, Ashoka decides to spread out the bodily relics of the Lord Buddha. Starting with the stupa Ajatashatru built in Pataliputra, Ashoka breaks open seven of the original Buddha-stupas. At each one he removes the relics. He leaves a small portion of those remnants at the site and has the stupa rebuilt or expanded. Then he orders that 84,000 decorated relic caskets be made and that portions of the divided relics be placed in each one. The caskets are inserted into urns. He gives these urns to semidivine Yakshas and orders them to have stupas built, all in one day, throughout the earth as far as the ocean, in cities large and small. From seven original relic-houses, 84,000 arise. And, the text concludes, from this point on Ashoka bears a new name.

The noble Mauryan king who built stupas
throughout the entire world to benefit all creatures—
previously known on earth as Ashoka the fierce
by this act now gained the name Ashoka the righteous.
(AA 55)

Sometime later, Ashoka approaches the Buddhist elder Upagupta. "It is my wish," he says, "to honor the places where the Lord Buddha lived, and to leave signs here as a favor to the future community" (AA 81). With Upagupta's assent, Ashoka calls up an army and assembles the necessary provisions of perfumes, flowers, and garlands. Ashoka and Upagupta then proceed first to Lumbini, and Upagupta points out the exact spot where the Buddha was born. The king's response is profound. He falls onto the ground with his whole body, and when he gets up again he is weeping and has his hands folded. In the grove of trees lives a female earthly deity who witnessed the Buddha's birth. At Ashoka's request, Upagupta summons her, and she describes the splendor she observed.

A light shone dazzling as gold,
lovely to the eye, through Indra's three worlds.
The earth and its mountains, bounded by the seas,
trembled like a ship on ocean waves.
(AA 83)

As a token of his veneration, Ashoka donates a hundred thousand gold pieces and sets up a shrine at the birthplace.

From Lumbini to Bodh Gaya, Sarnath and Kushinagara, the expert tour guide Upagupta leads Ashoka on a detailed pilgrimage that includes not just those four Great Places, but many other sites in between. They visit the place where the future Buddha grew up, where he practiced the skills suitable to a Kshatriya, where he made love with his sixty thousand palace women, where he first practiced meditation, and many more, thirty-two places in all. At a few places Upagupta is able to call upon divine eyewitnesses, since earthly deities enjoy longer lifespans than humans. At Bodh Gaya, Ashoka meets Kalika, leader of the Nagas, who had watched the Buddha as he sat down under the Bodhi tree. The pilgrimage concludes at Kushinagara, where the Buddha had died. After paying respects to the memorial there, Ashoka addresses his guide with a joyful heart.

By the hundreds of rites I have performed,
my human condition is made fruitful.
With the virtues and the vacillating powers of royal lordship,

I have grasped the highest essence.
With hundreds of shrines, splendid as piles of white clouds,
I have ornamented this world.
In fulfilling the command of the incomparable one today,
have I not accomplished a difficult feat!
(AA 92)

As the newspaper editor declares in the old Hollywood movie, "When the legend becomes fact, print the legend."[38] It is as a legend that stories of Ashoka, like the *Ashokavadana*, traveled throughout Asia, along with other Buddhist works. He was remembered as a paradigmatic Dharma-Chakravartin, a righteous emperor who employed the resources of his empire to support and expand the Buddhist order. Rulers in China, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and other Asian kingdoms would seek to emulate his legendary rule. This became the "fact" of Ashoka for many centuries.

But the material facts of Ashoka's historical actions also remained, in the form of buried lion capitals, covered-over stupas, inscribed rocks, and broken pillars. Starting in the early nineteenth century, epigraphists and archeologists have rediscovered and interpreted these remnants to disinter a historical Ashoka. Undoubtedly this Ashoka did provide moral and material support to the Buddhist order. Under his patronage the Buddhist venerative practices of pilgrimage and stupa worship, maintaining the presence of the Buddha, helped broaden the community beyond the disciplinary groups of monks and nuns. But he also sought to support other religious communities—all groups, in fact, as long as they were in harmony with what he called the "essence" of religion. The Dharma he promoted through his imperial proclamations and Dharma-ministers was broader and more diffuse than the Buddhist understanding of Dharma. Ashoka's Dharma was a political ethics intended to bring social cohesion, a meta-religion to knit together a large and varied empire.

Ashoka, Nehru, and the Indian Nation-State

On Indian coins and rupee notes, and on official documents of the Republic of India, a familiar image from Mauryan times peers out. In 1950, an official act introduced by India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, designated the Sarnath pillar capital with its four lions as the national emblem. The ancient lion's roar echoed intimately in the everyday spaces of modern Indian life. Another image from the Sarnath pillar appeared in the middle of the Indian flag. In 1947, just as India was gaining its independence from British colonial rule, Nehru proposed a new official flag design with the Dharmachakra—the wheel that had once sat atop the four lions—as its central insignia. Significantly, Ashoka's chakra replaced Mahatma Gandhi's charkha, or spinning wheel, on the Indian national flag. It was as if Ashoka had emerged from the deep past, as Bhagwan Josh puts it, to become the "presiding deity of the Indian nation-state."[39]

More than anyone, it was Nehru who promoted the official reincarnation of Ashoka in post-independence India. During his years of leadership in the struggle against British rule, Nehru says he was "obsessed with the idea of India."[40] But what exactly was India, he asked himself, apart from its physical and geographical aspects? In *Discovery of India*, written while he was in jail in 1944, Nehru describes his own efforts, through reading and a kind of imaginative national pilgrimage, to comprehend India through its history. At Mohenjo-daro, viewing the archeological remains of the ancient city, Nehru exclaims: "Astonishing thought: that any culture or civilization should have this continuity for five or six thousand years or more."[41] And at Sarnath, Nehru speaks of his epiphany.

> At Sarnath, near Benares, I would almost see the Buddha preaching his first sermon, and some of his recorded words would come like a distant echo to me through two thousand five hundred years. Ashoka's pillars of stone with their inscriptions would speak to me in their magnificent language and tell me of a man who, though an emperor, was greater than any king or emperor.[42]

These encounters with India's historical landscape, he goes on, allowed the long panorama of India's history to unfold before him. For this man of affairs, however, historical understanding was not sufficient in itself; it must connect itself to matters of the present day. "It [history] is not life, unless we can find the vital links between it and the present with all its conflicts and problems."[43] Perhaps the Mauryan emperor of the past could offer a vital link to the present, a usable past for the leader of an anti-imperial movement as he became prime minister of an independent nation-state.

The redeployment of this imperial pillar from the Mauryan era was appropriate for the new nation-state. Once freed from the British empire, India was itself an imperial-scale polity, encompassing an enormous population speaking multiple regional languages and belonging to myriad religious cultures, extending over most of the South Asian subcontinent. The Ashokan imagery was suitably ancient, reminding Indian citizens and the rest of the world that new India was heir to a venerable and continuous civilization stretching back several millennia. No doubt it was also important that this official national imagery not be associated with either Hindu or Muslim legacies, at a time of deep Hindu-Muslim communal tensions and violence. The Buddhist population in mid-twentieth-century India was negligible and not involved in the religious conflict of the times. Ashoka's chakra and lions, even if Buddhist in origin, could be seen as meta-religious insignia that would stand for India as a whole. As Nehru put it, in a 1947 speech about the flag at the Constituent Assembly, "It is well that at this moment of strife, conflict, and intolerance our minds should go back toward what India stood for in ancient days."[44]

6

Disciplinary Communities and Religious Quests

In the past I was poor, a widow, without children,
without friends or relatives, I did not get food or clothing.
Taking a bowl and stick, I went begging from family to family,
I wandered for seven years, tormented by cold and heat.
(Hallisey 2015: 71)[1]

SO SANG THE BUDDHIST NUN CHANDA, recalling the years of suffering she endured after she lost her family in a cholera epidemic. Without family to support her, she was reduced to a despondent life of wandering and begging. Then, she recalls, she spotted a more successful mendicant, and found a life-changing mentor in Patachara, a female Buddhist teacher.

Then I saw a nun as she was receiving food and drink.
Approaching her, I said, "Make me go forth to homelessness."
And she was sympathetic to me, and Patachara made me go forth,
she gave me advice and pointed me toward the highest goal.

Patachara had herself experienced great hardship and terrible sorrow. Her husband had died from a snakebite, her two infant children drowned in a flood, and her parents were crushed when their house collapsed on them. Mad with grief, she had wandered about until she met the Buddha Shakyamuni. With his guidance she gradually came to her senses. After attaining enlightenment Patachara became a teacher herself.

With Patachara's support, the bereft widow Chanda became part of a new community of women. In another song, Patachara speaks to a large following of as many as five hundred nuns, all of whom have lost children. Like Chanda, they have found in Patachara a compassionate teacher who could empathize with their grief and help them learn ways to dispel it. As Chanda continues in her song, Patachara has given her discipline and a transformative goal.

> I listened to her words and I put into practice her advice.
> That excellent woman's advice was not empty,
> I know the three things that most don't know,
> nothing fouls my heart.

To know these "three things"(*tevijja*) means that she recognizes that she is enlightened and will not be reborn. She ends on a note of triumph: in the Buddhist community she has finally arrived at a life of knowledge and contentment.

Chanda's song is one of seventy-three, collected in the *Therigatha* or "Poems of the Women Elders," attributed to the earliest female members of the Buddhist order. The songs were recited and passed down orally for centuries, within the order of female Buddhist mendicants, as exemplary songs of suffering, instruction, disciplinary practice, and personal self-transformation.[2]

Disciplinary Communities

Buddhist nuns were not the only ones to organize their religious lives collectively in Mauryan and post-Mauryan times. There were many such disciplinary communities in northern India. Some, like those in Patachara's congregation of nuns, were Shramanas who had gone forth from home and family (or what was left of them) to join renunciatory groups. Jains, Ajivakas, Buddhists, and other Shramana groups formed new communities, which they called *ganas* or *sanghas*. Brahmin renouncers gathered in *ashramas*, refuges set off from worldly life. Brahmins loyal to the Vedas maintained disciplined family life in endowed Brahmin villages (*brahmagrama*). Ashoka's inscriptions classified all these groupings as *parshadas*. They formed intentional communities of religious specialists in the increasingly urbanized world of northern India, made possible by an economy that allowed a division of labor. All these subcultures within Mauryan India aimed at spiritual or religious ends beyond those of material well-being. As Chanda puts it simply, they sought the "highest goal." In pursuit of these life-transforming ends, they adopted regimes of self-discipline. All shared the conviction that self-restraint and self-mastery lay at the foundation of a religious life.

Ethical Foundations of the Religious Life

In the early Jain work *Acharanga Sutra* (2.15.1-5), the Jain founder Mahavira instructs a group of Shramanas in the five "great vows" (*mahavrata*).[3] A Shramana, he tells them, should renounce (1) all killing of living beings, (2) all untrue speech, (3) all taking of things not freely given, (4) all sexual intercourse, and (5) all material possessions. These five vows form the foundation of Jain monastic life. Every Jain monk and nun takes these vows as part of their rite of initiation into the Jain Order. These principles of restrained conduct were widely shared among religious specialists in India of the Mauryan and post-Mauryan periods. Seekers like Chanda who were going forth to join the Buddhist Sangha would recite the "five rules of ethical conduct" (*panchashila*) as part of their rite of initiation, and these rules were embedded in the regular conduct of Buddhist novices. Patanjali's *Yogasutras* set out five ethical restraints (*yama*), exactly parallel to the Jain and Buddhist set, as the first limb of yogic practice.

These precepts are not the commandments of a supernatural deity, nor are they compulsory laws issued by a governing authority. They are codes of voluntary self-regulation that grow out of a shared analysis of the fundamental problems of phenomenal existence, carried out by the Upanishad teachers and the Shramana leaders. According to this analysis, the basic obstacles to good living lie in the forces of desire, greed, and attachment. These are internal states that lead to wrongful or harmful action. Through the impersonal extended causality of karma, acts taken out of desire and self-interest lead to forms of bondage, of greater attachment. The path to ameliorate and ultimately remove these inner forces requires that one seek to master one's self. Self-restraint leads to inner freedom. A disciplined effort to overcome these obstacles can lead to a life free from the constant pull of desire and attachments. This forms the starting point on the path to the highest state, whether that be Jain *moksha*, Buddhist *nirvana*, or Yogic *kaivalya*.

The same ethical principles, however, apply to everyone, mendicant renouncers and lay householders alike. As the *Yogasutras* emphasizes, the moral restraints are universal, applicable to all, without distinction of birth-group, place, time or particular circumstance (YS 2.31). Jain teachers prescribe the same set of five vows, along with seven others, for their lay adherents. Buddhist teachers ask their lay followers to reiterate the same five rules of ethical conduct, with three more, during a fortnightly ceremony. The lives of all people are subject to the same ego-based obstacles, the causal operations of karma apply to all, and so the same route of self-mastery is open to all. There will be differences among individuals, of course, in aspiration and determination. For most persons, living worldly lives, the principles will be virtuous ideals to observe as far as their situations allow. Others, however, will wish to attack these obstacles with great resolve. For them, often, the aim of overcoming hindrances will lead to going forth from worldly life and to joining a group of like-minded renouncers. The disciplinary communities established by Mahavira, Buddha Shakyamuni, and other Shramana teachers offered a social foundation for these efforts. They provided a place for informal enforcement of conduct along with instruction in doctrine and practices such as meditation.

Social Organization of Self-Discipline

To facilitate the difficult task of mastering the self, Shramanas organized themselves in small face-to-face congregations, where the more experienced could instruct new members in religious teachings and practices, as Patachara did with new recruit Chanda. Within the group, too, there was collective enforcement of shared codes of conduct.

These were not hermetic groups living isolated lives in the mountains or deserts. On the outskirts of settled society, they interacted regularly with the larger community. They begged for their food, engaged in conversations and religious instruction, and conducted shared ceremonies. Economically dependent, these disciplinary communities took care to keep their needs modest. For the surrounding society, they displayed their piety and austerity in what they ate and avoided eating, what they wore and chose not to wear, how they comported their bodies, and how they spent their time.

Archeological evidence for these disciplinary groups in Mauryan times is quite limited. Brahmin villages and Buddhist monastic retreats used impermanent materials that left no remains. The stone foundations of monastic institutions that cluster around many Ashoka-era stupa sites date from a later period.

One noteworthy exception is the group of seven rock-cut caves in the Barabar and Nagarjuni hills in the Magadha area. These impressive retreats were excavated, as inscriptions record, by Mauryan rulers to be used by Ajivaka Shramanas during the rainy season. Like the Buddhists and Jains, Ajivakas wandered much of the year, but they found it necessary to stay in one place for the monsoon months. Here the Ajivakas could reside in some elegance. Handsome entryways, imitating bent-wood structures in stone, lead to inner rooms of highly polished stone (**Fig. 12**).[4] These are the earliest Indian examples of rock-cut cave

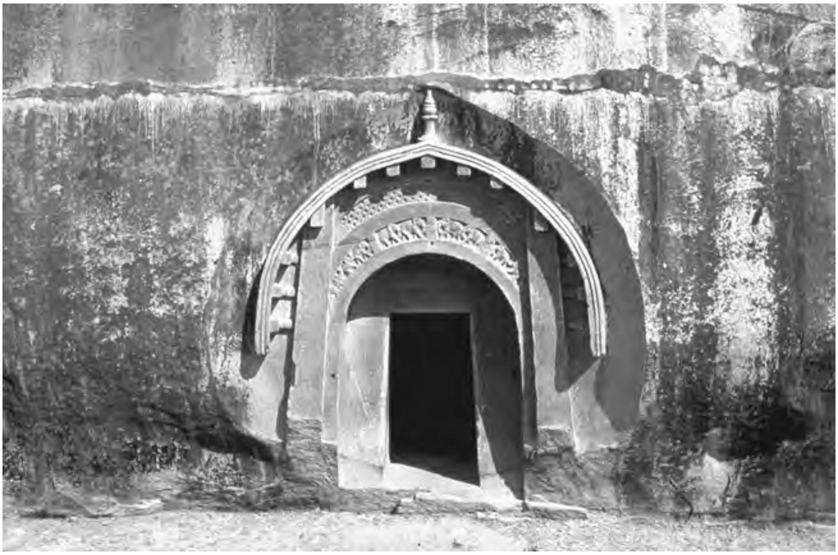


FIGURE 12. Lomas Rishi Cave Entrance, mid-3rd century BCE. Barabar Hills, Bihar. Photo by John C. Huntington. Courtesy of the John C. and Susan L. Huntington Photographic Archive of Buddhist and Asian Art.

structures, a type of religious architecture that would become common and highly elaborate in succeeding centuries.

Disciplinary communities of this period are best known through their verbal texts. In Mauryan and post-Mauryan times, these groups compiled and transmitted detailed codes of conduct to organize themselves as communities and to formalize their disciplinary practices. Codebooks like the Buddhist *Vinaya* and the Jain *Kalpasutras* set out guidelines for how best to live religious lives. These works are "ideal" or normative codes, like books of etiquette, rather than descriptive accounts of the actual workings of the groups. Nevertheless, they enable us to reimagine, in considerable detail, the ideal modes of life and transforming practices that each of these communities set out for themselves.

Among Brahmins loyal to the Vedas, renunciation was also an option. During Mauryan and post-Mauryan periods, forest-dwelling Brahmins established ashrams combining simplified living and physical austerities with Vedic recitation and fire-sacrifice. Others became full-fledged wandering ascetics. But for other Vedic Brahmins, the worldly life of householder offered its own opportunity for rigorous ethical conduct. They set out this code using the key term Dharma in works called Grihyasutras and Dharmasutras.

Smarta Brahmins and Their Dharma

Brahmins had begun organizing themselves as an endogamous class of religious specialists early on, as we have seen. They applied themselves to the priestly tasks of maintaining the sacred texts of the Vedas and performing a program of ritual sacrifices. In the Mauryan and post-Mauryan periods some Brahmins articulated a new and more far-reaching vision of what being a Brahmin should entail. Of course, there were many life-paths open to individual Brahmins. They could take up everyday nonreligious ways of life. They could become specialists in various new disciplines of knowledge, such as grammar and astronomy, that had grown out of their inquiries into the Veda. They could become forest-dwelling renouncers, along the path laid out in the Upanishads. They could even adopt the ways of Shramana groups like the Buddhists or Jains. Many remained loyal to the Vedic order and to their privileged role within it, which involved learning and transmission of the sacred texts and carrying out the sacred practices prescribed in them. But Mauryan rule had altered their situation. With Mauryan period shifts in elite patronage and a reduction of the authority-making role of sacrifice, Vedic loyalists began to rethink and reform their collective identity as Vedic Brahmins. They began to define themselves not only as mouthpieces of the Veda, but also as exemplars of Dharma.

For these Brahmins, however, Dharma would not be limited to the domain of sacrifice. Nor would it be Dharma as set forth in the words of the Buddha or the inscriptional pronouncements of Ashoka. In their understanding, Dharma involved an intimate and far-reaching code of proper conduct. However, there was no single universal code of Dharma applicable to all, as they understood it. Dharma was inflected according to the particularities of one's social identity: gender, class, age, profession, and stage of life. The Dharma of a male differed from that of a female. The Dharma of a Brahmin male differed from that of a Kshatriya male. The Dharma of a student was different than that of a householder or that of a renouncer. As Brahmins, they were particularly concerned with the Dharma of their own class.

Vedic Brahmins lived as married householders in family units, centered in small Brahmin communities. By the Mauryan period, Brahmin villages had become common in the Gangetic plains, the result often of royal gifts of tax-free land to Brahmins in exchange for ritual services.[5] There they were able to focus on the performance of domestic sacrificial practices, which they hyperbolically labeled the "five great sacrifices," and they diligently continued their immense task of memorizing, reciting, and transmitting the Vedic scriptures intact.

The new organization of ideal Brahmin life was spelled out most clearly in works that took shape in the Mauryan and post-Mauryan periods, and that appeared as ancillary to the Vedas—the Grihyasutras and the Dharmasutras. These works began within the Vedic shakhas, as expansions and clarifications of Vedic practice, but later the Brahmin science of Dharma developed into an autonomous discipline of knowledge, much as grammar and astronomy had. The Grihyasutras and Dharmasutras came to be classified as *smriti* ("remembered" works), in contrast to the revealed Vedas, classified as *shruti* ("heard" works). While the new code-books maintained a powerful fealty to the authoritative Vedas, they also articulated a new vision of the good life for a Brahmin religious specialist. As Patrick Olivelle puts it, the composers of the Dharmasutras represented "a different *Weltanschauung* than their ritual counterparts, even as they shared the Vedic ritual and mythological worlds."[6] We will call them Smarta Brahmins, living righteous lives guided by their *smriti* texts.

The Two Births of a Righteous Brahmin Male

As the Dharmasutras see it, the key to leading a righteous life and gaining the highest religious ends is Dharma. As Vasishtha's Dharmasutra states:

> Next comes the desire to know Dharma, in order to attain the highest goals of humans. Those who know Dharma and follow it are righteous (*dharmika*). Such a person becomes preeminent in this world and gains heaven after death. (VDhS 1.1-3)

The Dharmasutras begin their guides to the righteous Brahmin life with an account of initiation (*upanayana*). This ceremony takes place ideally eight years from conception, and it is the major rite of passage in the life of a Brahmin male. Apastamba understands initiation as a veritable second birth: "That [initiation] is the highest birth. His mother and father give birth just to his physical body" (ADhS 1.1.17-18). This second birth is a birth into Vedic learning, and its central act comes when the boy's teacher (*guru*) transmits to the initiate his first Vedic hymn. At this point the status of the male child is transformed. "Before initiation," says Gautama in his Dharmasutra, "a child may act as he pleases, speak as he pleases, and eat as he pleases . . . He urinates and defecates whenever he wishes" (GDhS 2.1-4). But upon initiation he becomes a person responsible for his own conduct. Restrictive rules come into force when he is initiated, Gautama states. Now he is expected to follow the rules of conduct as it is set out for him in Apastamba, Gautama, or another Dharmasutra. He becomes, as we would put it, a moral agent. As a twice-born Brahmin he now becomes a student, a *brahmacharin*, and enters into a lengthy period of Veda learning with his teacher.

Initiation may be the start of a Brahmin male's second or Vedic life, but of course it is not the beginning of his organic life. As Apastamba recognizes, his parents have already given birth to the boy's body. But how is that body made ready for initiation? The Dharmasutra authors generally skim over this question, deferring to the closely related Grihyasutras, guidebooks for the performance of domestic rites.[7] The Grihyasutras set out a sequence of actions prior to initiation that parents carry out to prepare their Brahmin son for his second birth into the Vedas. These are called *samskaras*, "refinements" or consecrations that collectively form and purify the boy's body, infusing good qualities into it and removing imperfections, to make it fit for initiation. A later text on Dharma, Manu's Dharmashastra, explains the underlying purpose of the consecrations: "The consecration of the body . . . should be performed for Brahmin males using auspicious Vedic rites. It purifies them both in this world and the next . . . The consecration rites wipe away the stain resulting from semen and uterine blood" (MDhSh 2.26-27). According to Manu, the organic constituents that bring about a new human being—the male's semen and the female's uterine blood in her womb—also entail "stains" or impurities that linger and infect the body after its birth. The Grihyasutras prescribe a series of eight or nine consecrations that gradually refine the Brahmin male body through ritual action.

Where does that body begin? For the Grihyasutras, the conception and purification of a male Brahmin body requires the shared work of a married couple. So the texts usually begin the sequence of domestic ceremonies with the topic of marriage (*vivaha*). Marriage brings together a suitable male with a suitable female to form a new family, a new domestic unit. The groom and bride unite by circling together around a sacrificial fire as the groom recites Vedic mantras. After their union, the groom takes his new bride from her father's home to the new home they will share as a couple. They also carry with them the sacrificial fire, which becomes the domestic fire of their new household. This fire, say the Grihyasutras, should be maintained constantly. In their new household, the groom and bride constitute a procreative couple, capable of bringing into being a new person through shared reproductive actions.

Females do not undergo initiation since they are not eligible to receive or transmit the Vedas. For a female, the texts say, marriage is equivalent to initiation for a male. It will be the most profound rite of passage in her life. In this patrilocal society, marriage removes the bride from the home of her parents and transfers her to a new home. This is when a female becomes a moral agent. She is now responsible for observing Dharma, though it will be the Dharma specific to her gender, *stri-dharma*, or "female Dharma."[8] As one half of a new married couple, the wife will also become a ritual actor—albeit not the one officiating or reciting Vedic words—in shared domestic rites. After their marriage, husband and wife act together in rituals. Together the couple maintains the domestic fire in the evening and in the morning. Of all the household rites, though, the most consequential is the procreation and ritual consecration of a son. The Grihyasutras trace out this process in the series of samskaras, enacted by husband and wife, from marriage to their son's initiation.

The first of these consecrations aims at bringing a healthy male child into the world. After a couple's marriage, naturally, comes sexual intercourse leading—they hope—to impregnation. According to the Grihyasutras, this is enacted ritually in the consecration of *garbhadhana*, "placing the embryo in the womb." At a specified time, the wife bathes. The couple eats together, and the husband offers ablutions into the domestic fire and recites Vedic passages. During sexual intercourse, the husband should invoke various gods and request that they implant his seed fruitfully into his wife's womb.

When the wife is three or four months pregnant, the couple performs the *pumsavana* rite, the consecration aimed at "producing a male." According to Apastamba, the husband takes a shoot of the banyan tree with two fruits, looking like testicles. He grinds it up into a powder, mixes it with water, and inserts this into the right nostril of his wife. Thus, states Apastamba, she will give birth to a son. Gender differentiation, it seems, was understood to be a gradual process within the mother's womb that was susceptible to ritual assistance along the way. In the latter stages of pregnancy the couple performs another consecration to help ensure an easy delivery. The *simantonnayana*, or "parting the mother's hair," symbolizes the more profound parting the mother will later be called upon to perform. Finally, the organic act of childbirth also has an accompanying consecration rite, the *jatakarma*, or "action of birth." The father should first touch the newborn and recite Vedic prayers for health, long life, and intelligence. Then he puts the child in his mother's breast and addresses mantras to the mother.

After the male child is born, his parents perform several further consecrations during his early years. These mark out stages in the physical growth and gradual individuation of the child: getting a name, eating his first rice, and getting a topknot of hair. All these consecrations—from the rites of marriage, impregnation, childbirth, and childhood rites—are part of the "first birth" of the Brahmin, his organic birth and the nurture provided by his mother and father. These are preparations for the second birth of the boy, through initiation, into the Veda.

The rite of initiation marks a profound moment of transition in the life of a young Brahmin male. It occurs most often when the boy is eight years old, which is calculated from the time of conception rather than birth. It separates him from his childhood home and life with his parents. His head is shaved. He takes the hand of his new initiating teacher, his guru or *acharya*, who will perform the ceremony. After he is initiated, the boy will reside in the home of his preceptor, not that of his parents. Initiation acts as a rite of entry into a new stage of life. (Upanayana means "leading up to" or introduction.) He adopts new clothing and insignia, including a sacrificial thread. Most important, he is led up to the Veda. Sitting close to a sacrificial fire, the preceptor instructs the initiate in the recitation of his first Vedic hymn. The Gayatri mantra is recited for the sake of the entire Veda, says Apastamba. This hymn requesting inspiration and understanding is certainly an appropriate entry point, for, in his new stage of life, the initiated Brahmin will devote himself intensively to learning the Veda.

Smarta Education

Upon initiation, the Brahmin male becomes a brahmacharin, a student or, more literally, "one who practices the sacred words of the Veda." As a student, he will spend years with his teacher memorizing and learning to recite the Veda of his own lineage.

"He who enters on a brahmacharin's life," says the *Shatapatha Brahmana*, "enters into a long sacrificial session" (ShBr 11.3.3.2). This stage of a Brahmin's life, lasting many years, is in many ways like an extended ritual. It follows the pattern of a lengthy rite of passage, in the sense long ago described by sociologist Arnold Van Gennep.[9] Brahmacharin begins with the rite of initiation, which separates him from his natal family. The new student lives apart, in an extended state of liminality, until his Veda education is complete. He then returns to his parental home, with a ceremonial bath of reincorporation, and he gains a new status as a "bath-graduate" (*snataka*). Then he is ready to take a wife and become a householder.

As a brahmacharin, the student adopts physical signs of his status. He wears a belt made of munja grass and carries a staff of palasha wood. He covers his body in deerskin. He shaves his head or leaves just a tuft of hair on top. While a student, he adheres to an austere code of conduct. He begs for his food, and does not eat spices, sweets, or meat. He sleeps on the ground. He gathers firewood and does errands for his teacher. He abstains from all sexual intercourse. (Indeed, so important was this provision that the word *brahmacharya* came to be used in Sanskrit as a synonym for sexual abstinence, and it continues to be used this way in modern Indic languages.) He comports himself with self-restraint. He is "gentle, calm, mild-mannered, modest, resolute, energetic, free of anger, and free of spite" (ADhS 1.3.17-24). In many ways, the brahmacharin during this liminal period adopts a lifestyle similar in its visible signs of piety and austere comportment to that of the Shramana renouncers. As Timothy Lubin puts it, "The *brahmacārin* became one of the exemplary figures of the holy Brahmin: the chaste, dutiful apprentice of a pious householder Brahmin master, firewood in hand, with staff and deerskin."[10]

The main purpose of this period in a Brahmin's life, however, is to learn the Veda. The student lives in the home of his initiating teacher, who instructs him in the Veda. The teacher is a second father who gives birth by means of Veda knowledge. The relationship is a close one, marked by both love and hierarchy. The teacher loves the student as a son and imparts knowledge without holding anything back. The student, obedient and deferential, approaches his teacher as if he were a god. He begins and ends each session by grasping the feet of his teacher, and during instruction he sits in a respectful posture close to the teacher. Transmission of the Veda is oral and utilizes the mnemonic methods developed within the Vedic shakhas and charanas. The teacher conveys to the student the Veda of his particular shakha—whether that be the *Rig Veda*, the *Black Yajur Veda*, or another. The Veda would include not just the Samhita of the particular recension, but also the attached Brahmana, Aranyakas, and Upanishads. One Veda will suffice, though an unusually ambitious student might also learn other Veda recensions by choice.

Through concentrated effort, perhaps over twelve years, the brahmacharin comes to memorize the Veda, or better, to incorporate that Veda into his own body. As the *Shatapatha Brahmana* puts it, "all the Vedas enter" into the successful brahmacharin, and he blazes up upon completing this final bath, "just as a fire blazes up with kindling fuel" (ShBr 11.3.3.7). The Vedic fire inside the Brahmin glows and emanates outward. It is an apt metaphor, since it suggests that the brahmacharin through his study of the Veda becomes an embodiment of the priestly god Agni. Fire can be procreated, passed on to light a new fire without extinguishing itself, as the teacher has kindled his Veda knowledge within the student. To keep a fire burning requires regular kindling, and in his subsequent life as a householder the Smarta Brahmin will need to maintain his continuing discipline of Veda recitation.

Householder Dharma and the Five Great Sacrifices

The Dharmasutras acknowledge that there are several paths a student could follow after completing his Vedic studies. As Gautama puts it, "Some people say that one has a choice among the orders. One could choose to be a brahmacharin, a householder, a mendicant, or a renouncer" (GDhS 3.1-2). He might continue on as a student, subject to his teacher, to learn still more of the Veda. He could decide to become a mendicant and live without possessions and subsist on the alms he obtains through begging. He might even become a full-fledged ascetic, practicing austerities in forest isolation. (In later works on Dharma, like Manu's Dharmashastra, these orders of religious life are arranged into a sequence of life stages.) Any of these might be appropriate for some individuals, but there is no question in Gautama's mind which one is superior. "Of all these, the householder is their source, since the others do not produce offspring" (GDhS 3.3). The other ways of life preclude sexual activity and therefore fail to reproduce the society that will support them. After outlining the other possible types of postgraduate religious life, Gautama states his preference even more emphatically: "The authorities state that there is really just one order, because only the householder stage is prescribed by direct Vedic injunction" (GDhS 3.35).

The Smarta Brahmin householder (*grihastha*) is a male who has completed a course of Veda study. He has married and, with his wife, he maintains a home and a domestic fire. Together, the couple seeks to procreate sons, to continue the family lineage. The householder regularly recites the Veda and offers daily sacrifice. And he observes the code of Dharma suitable to his class and order of life.

The Dharmasutras and later Dharmashastras greatly expanded the range of matters to which the code of Dharma applied. In the home of the Brahmin householder, domestic matters such as food preparation, reception of guests, gift giving and gift receiving, observances of bodily purity and pollution, and the interactions with outsiders all came to be matters of Dharma. Stephanie Jamison calls this the "sacralization of the everyday."[11] But certain activities were of greatest concern in the life of a Smarta Brahmin householder. These were codified as the "five great sacrifices" (*mahayajna*).

Earlier Vedic literature, we have seen, prescribed public sacrificial ceremonies of great complexity. They might require substantial resources, employ multiple Brahmin priests, and last many days or weeks. By contrast, the five great sacrifices of the Dharmasutras are small daily domestic affairs. They do not require more resources than a fire log or flowers and need as officiant only the Brahmin householder assisted by his wife. Nevertheless, Baudhayana insists that these five great sacrifices of the Smarta Brahmin home are equal to the great public sacrifices of old (BDhS 2.6.1).

Every day the householder should make sacrificial offerings to five categories of beings: to gods, to ancestor-spirits (*pitri*), to semidivinities (*bhuta*), to humans, and to the sacred words of the Veda (*brahman*). The sacrificial actions could themselves be minimal. To offer a daily sacrifice to the gods, for example, one must ritually add at least one piece of firewood to the domestic fire. A daily sacrifice to the ancestor-spirits—three generations of the householder's male ancestors—could be completed by presenting one cup of water along with the ritual utterance, "*svadha*." For the semidivinities, a minimum sacrifice involves offering flowers with hands folded in reverence. A sacrifice to humans entails respectful hospitality to worthy guests (*atithi*), with food, drink, and accommodations. As Apastamba (2.6.3) puts it, a guest who has studied the Veda comes blazing like a sacrificial fire, and all tokens of hospitality are like so many oblations into that fire.

To offer a sacrifice to the Veda, not surprisingly, requires recitation or repetition of the sacred words of the Veda. The Smarta Brahmin householder who has studied the Veda must maintain that knowledge, just as one must maintain a fire through regular kindling. Baudhayana emphasizes this daily activity by drawing out the homologies between the verbal recitation of the Veda and the physical implements and results of a public sacrifice.

> Daily recitation is precisely the sacrifice to the Veda. And in this sacrifice to the Veda, speech is the *juhu* ladle, his mind is the *upabhrit* ladle, the eye is the *dhruva* ladle, his mental energy is the *sruva* ladle, truth is the final bath, and the result is the world of heaven. If one knows this and does the full recitation, he gains the world of heaven just as much as the one who gives away the whole world full of wealth in a public sacrifice. Even more, he gains the Imperishable, overcoming repeated death. "Therefore one should perform daily recitation," says the *Shatapatha Brahmana*. And it also declares, "Even if one is anointed with oil, relaxed, lying on a couch, if he recites the Veda mantras of a sacrifice, just by that he performs the sacrifice." (BDhS 2.6.11.7-8)

By this principle, the Smarta Brahmin householder who recites the Veda daily in his home does not require a wealthy patron or elaborate resources. He is able to perform, by his recitation, those public sacrifices that would otherwise be impossible to perform in public.

The Dharmasutra authors were certainly cognizant of other ways of religious life and of the challenges that the Shramana movements had posed for the privileged status claimed by Vedic Brahmins. With a loss of opportunities to preside over large public sacrificial ceremonies, such as occurred during Ashoka's rule, Smarta Brahmins loyal to the Veda re-centered their religious lives around domestic rites. The Dharmasutras advanced a new religious ideal: the male Brahmin householder observing a detailed code of Dharma, reciting the Veda, performing small domestic sacrifices, and passing on the Vedic legacy to a son. This householder would gain great spiritual ends. As Baudhayana claims, he will win the world of heaven, gain the imperishable, and overcome transmigration.

While stressing these individual attainments, the Dharmasutras looked toward social and cosmic goals as well. Quoting an older Vedic statement, Baudhayana asserts that a Brahmin is born owing three debts: to the Vedic rishis, to the gods, and to the ancestors. He repays these debts over the course of his religious life by learning and transmitting the Veda, by offering sacrifices to the gods, and by producing male offspring. The Dharmasutras value continuity. They maintain a Vedic way of life in altered circumstances. Like the earlier Vedic program of public sacrifice, the Smarta Brahmins sought to preserve the social and cosmic order of things in the more circumscribed domain of the household.

Brahmin Ascetics

Gautama may have disdained them, but in reality, Brahmin ascetics had a significant presence in early Indian religious life. From pre-Mauryan times, as we see in the Upanishads, throughout classical times, Brahmin renouncers and renunciatory settlements appear to have been common and highly visible. The Dharmasutras recognize renunciation as an option for Vedic Brahmins, even though they usually view this option—much as they viewed the Shramana renunciatory orders—as a dead end. (Later Dharmashastra works, starting with that of Manu, would reserve renunciation for a later stage in a male Brahmin's life, like a retirement after fulfilling one's important familial and social duties.) Yet Brahmin ascetics offer another striking ideal of rigorous religious life within the Vedic orientation.

The Smarta literature recognizes two categories of Brahmin ascetics: forest dweller (*vanaprastha*) and wandering ascetic (*yati* or *sannyasin*).[12] The forest dweller begins to reduce conduct with larger society and adopts physical signs of separation. He sleeps on the ground and stays outside of all settled villages. He wears his hair matted and clothes of bark or skin. But in this semirenunciation, he continues to maintain the sacrificial fires, and he pays homage to the five categories of beings as does the Brahmin householder. The wandering ascetic adopts a more stringent degree of austerity. He goes forth into homelessness with no possessions except his begging bowl and waterpot. He goes naked or wears a loincloth, or at most an ochre robe. He begs for his food.

Baudhayana describes a ritual for one entering into this stage of renunciation. After shaving his head and beard and gathering his minimal ascetic possessions, he performs a final fire sacrifice. Then he throws the sacrificial implements into the fire and "deposits the sacred fires in himself" by inhaling the smell of the fire. By this, he internalizes the sacrificial fire. After this he will not perform any external sacrificial rites. At this point he is able to proclaim his achievement; he repeats "I have renounced" three times softly and three times aloud (BDhS 2.10.17.26-27). As a renouncer, he lives as a silent sage, without fire or home. His orientation is toward the highest goal. As Vasishtha puts it: "For one who dwells always in the forest, senses under control and all sensual desires extinguished, his mind focused on the inner Atman and indifferent to all else—for that renouncer, final liberation is certain" (VDhS 10.17).

The Dharmasutras have at best a grudging respect for these Brahmin renouncers, but we can gain a more laudatory picture of them from literary accounts. In the Sanskrit epics, they play a striking role. In the *Ramayana*, when the heroic prince Rama is exiled from the kingdom of Ayodhya, he travels into the Dandaka Forest to the south of the Gangetic plains. There he encounters small clustered communities, or ashrams, of Brahmin sages.[13] They wear clothes of bark and dwell in simple leaf-huts. They sleep on the ground and keep their food minimal. They occupy themselves with practices of reciting the Veda and offering simple domestic fire sacrifices. In these ways, they correspond to the Dharmasutra category of forest dwellers. Valmiki also describes acts of greater austerity. Some sages stand upright surrounded by four fires, with the blazing sun overhead as the fifth, in the "five-fire vow." Through their virtuous lives and rigorous disciplinary practices, they come to glow with "Brahmanical majesty," and they generate "ascetic power."

A more fulsome literary description of a Brahmin ashram appears in the *Mahabharata* story of Shakuntala.[14] Out hunting in the forests along the Malini River north of the Ganges, King Duhshanta finds his way to the ashram of Kanva, a Brahmin seer and ascetic. Duhshanta is dazzled by its peaceful beauty. Approaching the cloister, he sees tigers and deer, predator and prey, lying peacefully together, and he hears echoes of auspicious Veda recitation across the river. When he enters, he finds a veritable college of Vedic scholars. There are *Rig Veda* specialists reciting the Rig hymns in both word-wise and step-wise manners.

There are others who know the sacrifice and the auxiliary Vedic disciplines. There are experts in the *Atharva Veda*. There are other Brahmins who speak impeccable Sanskrit, those who know the sacrifices and the consecrations, those who are masters of phonetics, those who know about Moksha and Dharma, and those who are experts in the elements of logical argumentation. Duhshanta imagines that Kanva's ashram is like the heavenly world of the god Brahman. It is a heavenly refuge of Vedic Brahmin learning, maintained in a forest cloister far from the capital city, by Brahmin forest dwellers. Here is another enduring image of ideal Brahmin piety.

The Buddhist Sangha: Monks and Their Discipline

By the Mauryan period, followers of the Buddha Shakyamuni had established themselves as a far-reaching Sangha (congregation). This full Buddhist order consisted of four divisions: male and female mendicants (*bhikshus*, *bhikshunis)* and male and female lay-supporters (*upasaka*, *upasika*). The term Sangha often refers more restrictively to just the mendicant portions of the order, and I will use it here in that restricted sense. The mendicant monks and nuns, who had "gone forth" from normal society and lived as itinerant Shramanas on the outskirts of settled society, organized themselves as self-regulating communities around shared religious teachings and practices. While these Buddhist subcultures maintained an ethos of separation, they were also materially dependent on the surrounding society and interacted with it in diverse ways.

The early Buddhist Sangha narrated a story of its own origins. It begins, not surprisingly, with the key events in the life of the Buddha Shakyamuni. If the Smarta Brahmins look back to a foundational corpus of transcendent texts, the Vedas, whose composition was outside of human agency, the Buddhists trace themselves from the human teacher who attained a transcendent state of enlightenment. (We should keep in mind that their origin story is not necessarily a historically factual account, but rather the way that the early Buddhist Sangha chose to represent and remember its tradition in narrative form.) The *Mahavagga* section of the Buddhist *Vinaya* ("Discipline") collection outlines this story: the Buddha's enlightenment, his first teaching, the ordination of his first five disciples, his collection of sixty followers, and his sending them forth in all directions to proclaim his message. The story spans the forty-five year career of the Buddha as a peripatetic teacher and organizer of a growing Shramana movement. It also relates, as a special part of the narrative, the organization of a female order of nuns alongside the male monks. And it goes on to relate the Buddha's death and the calling of the first Buddhist council after his death, at which the Buddha's teachings and his disciplinary instructions are compiled and recited collectively by five hundred senior monks as the Buddhist Dharma and Vinaya.

The principles and practical rules of discipline for the Buddhist Sangha are contained in the *Vinaya*, one of the three major collections, or "baskets" (*pitaka*), in the Buddhist textual canon.[15] The *Vinaya* discusses a great variety of matters pertinent to the self-governing community of Buddhist mendicants. It sets out the procedures by which one becomes a monk or a nun, and guidelines for determining who is eligible to do so. It lays down the rules of conduct incumbent on all members of the Sangha, the means of enforcing the code, and the proper penalties for infractions. It sets limits on the material possession of the monks and nuns, and it enforces a strict code of sexual restraint. It conveys guidelines for beneficial interactions between Buddhist mendicants and the larger society. Overall, much like the Dharmasutras of the Smarta Brahmins, the Buddhist *Vinaya* provides a prescriptive program for its community to live an organized religious life that will enable its members to pursue higher spiritual ends.

Initiation: Becoming a Monk

A person is not born a Buddhist monk or nun. Nor is there a sequence of life-cycle rituals of preparation, as the Smarta texts set out for Brahmin males. Rather, it is an act of volition, a decision taken by an individual. This involves a twofold process: first of going forth and leaving behind one's previous life and position in society, and second of joining and becoming part of a new subculture. This is enacted in two separate rites of initiation: the rite of renunciation (*pravrajya*) and that of ordination (*upasampada*). Through these two rites one takes on a new identity as a member of the Buddhist Sangha.

The *Mahavagga*, a part of the *Vinaya* collection, narrates the development of Buddhist initiation as a gradual elaboration. When the Buddha Shakyamuni delivers his first teaching at Deer Park, the ascetic Kondanna immediately comprehends the new doctrine and asks to receive both renunciation and ordination. The Buddha complies with a simple verbal invitation: "Come, monk. The Dharma has been taught well. Follow the rules of the moral life (*brahmacariya*) for putting an end to all suffering" (MV 1.6.32). This was the first Buddhist ordination. The same procedure holds true for the first sixty followers. Once the Sangha has grown to sixty monks, however, the Buddha sends them forth, to wander in all directions, as teaching disciples. Initially the monks bring their likely candidates back to the Buddha for initiation, but all the extra travel proves to be exhausting. The Buddha decides to allow the monks to perform these rites themselves.

> Monks, you should confer the rites of renunciation and ordination like this: the candidate should first have his hair and beard cut off. He should put on yellow robes and adjust the upper robe to cover one shoulder. He bows to the feet of the monks, and then sits in a squatting position and raises his folder hands in anjali. He must then say the formula three times: I take refuge in the Buddha. I take refuge in the Dharma. I take refuge in the Sangha. Monks, I prescribe that the rites of renunciation and ordination be done with these three refuges. (MV 1.12.3-4)

Within the early Buddhist order this original one-step process was expanded into two distinct ceremonies of renunciation and ordination, with a liminal period of novitiate in between the two. Like the Smarta Brahmin sequence of initiation-studenthood-householder, the Buddhist process follows the pattern of an extended rite of passage.

One who wishes to become a mendicant within the Buddhist Sangha must first "go forth." To do so, one shaves the head and face, exchanges worldly clothing for the yellow robes of the Buddhists, and applies to a senior monk or an assembly of monks for admission. The monk will evaluate the candidate as to age, parental permission, and health. There are no restrictions of class. However, there are disqualifications. The Sangha will not accept those with a violent history, those who are fleeing the law, those who have seduced nuns, eunuchs, hermaphrodites, and those with communicable diseases. The suitable applicant prostrates before the monk and recites three times the Buddhist refuges. The officiating monk then explains to the applicant the ten rules of monastic life. These are all in the form of abstentions and center around the ethical foundations of the religious life. The mendicant-to-be is forbidden to kill, steal, engage in sexual intercourse, lie, consume intoxicants, eat after midday, dance or sing, ornament the body, sleep on luxurious beds, or accept gold or silver. If the applicant accepts these behavioral austerities, he or she becomes a novice (*shramanera*).

The novice lives under the guidance of a preceptor. During this intervening period—which lasts a minimum of five years and may last ten or more—the novice receives instruction in the basic tenets and texts of the order and in the practice of meditation. The pupil acts as a servant to the teacher, much as a Brahmin brahmacharin does for his teacher. A novice is not considered a full member of the Sangha and does not attend formal ceremonies such as the fortnightly Pratimoksha recitation.

After a suitable period of preparation, the novice may approach the senior monks to request ordination. Since this is a collective action of the Sangha, it requires a quorum of ten monks. The applicant squats and states his or her request to the assembled monks three times. An officiating monk inquires as to the qualifications of the candidate. If the applicant passes this inquiry, the officiant states a motion to the assembly three times that the candidate be accepted. Silence is approval. If no objections are made, the candidate is ordained as a new monk, a full member of the Buddhist Sangha and of a particular parish. He or she is immediately reminded of the four austere "supports" for the life of a Buddhist mendicant: food obtained by begging, a robe of rags, a dwelling at the foot of a tree, and medicine consisting of fermented urine. As a mendicant member of the Buddhist Sangha, he or she will now participate in its collective activities and is now subject to its discipline.

Discipline in the Sangha

The monastic Sangha was, in one sense, simply a voluntary group of individual seekers. Each mendicant became a member in hopes of following the path of the Buddha Shakyamuni toward enlightenment. But it was also an intentional community, organized to facilitate these individual pursuits within a collective setting. As a community, the Sangha developed methods of instruction for new members, transmission of teachings, and disciplinary self-regulation.

The *Vinaya* credits the elaboration of the self-governing Sangha to the Buddha himself. As his following grows, wayward mendicants pose a series of challenges, and the Buddha is called upon to resolve them. His pragmatic decisions in each case form precedents, and these are recorded in the *Vinaya* as the code of Buddhist monastic conduct. The social engineering of the mendicant Sangha is just as important for the historical fortunes of Buddhism as the Buddha's teachings.

Central to the Buddhist monastic discipline is the Pratimoksha. This is a set of rules incumbent on all members of the Sangha, 227 rules for monks according to the Theravada version and 310 rules for nuns. The rules are arranged in order of seriousness. The four most egregious violations involve automatic expulsion from the Sangha. Others range down to lesser transgressions which require simple confession as penalty. There are no physical punishments involved. The Pratimoksha rules are administered in collective assemblies held every fortnight, on new- and full-moon days. In the Indic lunar calendar, these are holy days. The Vedas prescribe that the key Shrauta sacrifice, Darshapurnamasa Ishti, be performed on these days. At the Buddhist gatherings, the monks recite the entire Pratimoksha code together three times. Those guilty of any violation of the code are expected to confess; silence is understood as innocence. Concealing transgressions is itself a transgression, like lying under oath. The emphasis here is on mendicant self-regulation rather than external surveillance.

The *Mahavagga* narrates how the Pratimoksha ceremony came into practice and illustrates the Buddha's pragmatic decision-making. As the story goes, another group of Shramanas called the Tirthikas have taken up a custom of holding assemblies on the fortnightly holy days, during which they recite their Dharma.[16] People come to listen to and appreciate their teachings. Some become followers of the Tirthikas. King Bimbisara of Magadha observes this and gives some friendly advice to the Buddha. Maybe his followers should adopt this method to attract followers. Accordingly, the Buddha prescribes to the monks that they assemble on those holy days. The monks follow his recommendation and gather together, but, without further instruction, they simply sit quietly. People come out to listen, and grow annoyed by their silence. "How can they just sit there like hogs?" the visitors murmur angrily. The Buddha learns of this and tells the monks that they should recite the Buddhist Dharma at the assemblies. Upon further reflection, the Buddha amends his instruction. He tells them instead to recite the Pratimoksha at those assemblies, and he sets out the procedures they should follow. As the *Mahavagga* story implies, the Buddhist Pratimoksha ceremony arises in a competitive religious setting, with several groups laying claim to the lunar holy days. The Buddhists develop it as an opportunity for the public display of Sangha discipline.

The *Mahavagga* continues its narrative by outlining new problems that arise. Some overzealous monks begin to recite the Pratimoksha every day; the Buddha determines that this is too often. Some hurried monks recite an abridged Pratimoksha; the Buddha rules that such shortcuts are not allowable, except in cases where there is real physical danger. Some monks begin to recite it in their individual huts; the Buddha decides that it must be recited collectively and out in the open. All monks residing within a monastic precinct or parish (*sima*, literally "boundary") should gather for these recitations, but questions arise over how to determine the boundaries of a parish. How far should individual monks have to travel to attend a ceremony? What if two groups of monks within a single parish want to hold separate ceremonies? What if the assembly place is too small to accommodate all those attending? Do the most eminent monks, who are surely beyond all need to confess flaws, also need to attend a Pratimoksha recitation? The Buddha is called in to resolve each of these issues, like a wise and practical judge.

The Pratimoksha rules in the *Vinaya* reflect the problems and anxieties of the Buddhist Sangha as it organized itself as a disciplinary community. Not surprisingly, these issues often revolved around the ethical foundations of the religious life, most notably the renunciation of material possessions and the abstinence from sexual activities.

The *Mahavagga* relates that a certain Brahmin joins the Sangha for his belly's sake. (In early Buddhist literature, Brahmins are seen as uncommonly fond of their food.) In response, the Buddha states the "four resources" of a monk: alms for food, rag-made robes for clothing, the foot of a tree for shelter, and decomposing urine for medicine. All candidates should be advised of this highly restrictive code when joining the order. However, with the success and growth of the Buddhist community, lay followers often wished to make donations of material resources, and this required careful regulation. The story of Pilindavakka, one of the Buddha's early followers, illustrates the problem. He sets out to carve out a cave dwelling near Rajagriha, and the generous king Bimbisara donates five hundred "park-keepers"—in effect, an entire village—to support the monk. Later, Pilindavakka demonstrates his supernatural powers, and people bring an abundance of medicine to him and his fellow monks. They store it away. At this point people begin to get annoyed, charging that the Shramanas are becoming storers of wealth. The Buddha is called to intercede, and he places a limit on stockpiling medicine.

There was, no doubt, a delicate balance for a renunciatory community. While the Sangha was inclined to accept the pious gifts of lay followers, it was also important to maintain the ascetic ethos. Elsewhere the Buddha criticized the Vedic Brahmins, living sumptuous lives on their brahmadeya villages. But an affluent Buddhist community was vulnerable to criticism from the more austere Shramana groups like the Jains and Ajivakas. The *Vinaya* rules illustrate the careful middle path in the early Sangha between grateful acceptance of donated wealth and righteous poverty. What kinds of dwellings are acceptable? What kinds of furnishings can go in them? In the *Vinaya*, the Buddha addresses these and many other questions of material resources. Over time, growth in the Buddhist community would favor acceptance, and the order—if not its individual members—did become affluent.

The regulation of sexuality was also a significant concern in the early Buddhist Sangha. Engaging in sexual intercourse with anyone, including an animal, was one of the four "conditions of defeat" leading to expulsion of a monk or nun. The Pratimoksha includes strictures regarding masturbation, flirtation, seduction, acting as an intermediary in a sexual liaison, and more. These offenses would require a period of probation and further discipline. A monk must not take a seat with a female if that place is secluded and suitable for sexual intercourse. With the organization of a parallel community of female monastics, another set of strictures carefully governed interactions between monks and nuns. A monk should not take food procured by a nun, or travel with her, or give a robe to her. Shaved heads and loose-fitting robes might mitigate the gender distinctions among male and female members of the order, but the *Vinaya* makes clear that sexual attraction was an ongoing force that both monks and nuns were required to resist as part of their disciplinary training.

Dharma Reciters

Memorization and recitation of sacred texts played a central role in the Buddhist Sangha, much as it did for Smarta Brahmins. Buddhist monks and nuns organized themselves as a community of reciters. Since they grounded themselves in the teachings of the Buddha Shakyamuni, they held that it was crucial to learn and hand down his words accurately. All members of the congregation would regularly recite some portions, like the Pratimoksha. Within the monastic division of labor, some monks known as *bhanakas* (reciters) specialized in memorization, recitation, and transmission of the full Buddhist Dharma. This was an oral practice for the first three or four centuries of Buddhism; written Dharma would appear only in the first century CE.[17]

Because the early Buddhist order was a peripatetic one, the need for accurate rendering of the Buddha's teachings was a concern from the start. Several sutras set in the Buddha's lifetime reflect this. The *Pasadika Sutta* takes place when the Buddha is an aged teacher. His Shramana contemporary Mahavira, the Jain founder, has just died. According to the satirical Buddhist account, as soon as their master dies the disputatious Jain followers fall into factional quarrelling. They attack one another:

> "You don't understand this doctrine and discipline—I do!" "How could *you* understand this doctrine and discipline?" "Your way is all wrong—mine is right!" "I am consistent—you aren't!" "You said last what you should have said first, and you said first what you should have said last!" "What you took so long to think up has already been refuted!" "Your argument has been overthrown, you're defeated!" "Go on, save your doctrine—get out of that if you can!" (DN 29.1)

Their own lay supporters become disgusted with the argumentative Jain monks, who now lack a leader to adjudicate their debates. A young Buddhist novice observes all this and describes the scene to the Buddha. Citing his own old age and impending death, the Buddha recommends that all his disciples assemble and recite his teachings collectively.

> Therefore, Chunda, all you to whom I have taught these truths that I have realized by super-knowledge should come together and recite them, setting meaning beside meaning, and expression beside expression, without dissension, in order that this holy life may continue and be established for a long time for the profit and happiness of the many out of compassion for the world and for the benefit, profit, and happiness of gods and humans. (DN 29.17)

He goes on to set out methods that the monks can use when disagreements as to wording or meaning should arise.

The founding event in the formation of the Buddhist Sangha as a community of reciters, however, took place shortly after the death of the Buddha. This was the first Buddhist council held near the Magadha capital of Rajagriha. (The term *sangiti*, usually translated as "council," literally means "collective recitation.") As the *Cullavagga* in the *Vinaya* tells the story, soon after the Buddha dies, one elderly monk urges his fellow monks to rejoice. Now, without their master around to discipline them, he says, they will finally be able to do whatever they wish. The eminent monk Maha Kashyapa gets wind of this and decides that a council is needed. He sees it as a matter of preserving the Buddha's words accurately and stabilizing the Sangha's discipline.

> Come, friends, let us chant together the Dharma and the Vinaya, before that which is not Dharma shines forth and overshadows what is Dharma, before that which is not Vinaya shines and overshadows what is Vinaya, before those who speak what is not the Dharma become powerful and those who do speak the Dharma become weak, and before those who speak what is not the Vinaya become powerful and those who do speak the Vinaya become weak. (CV 11.1.1.)

Kashyapa selects an assembly of five hundred senior monks, and they decide to spend the rainy season retreat on a hill near Rajagriha.

At the council, Kashyapa acts as chief questioner. First he asks Upali about the Pratimoksha code. The barber Upali has shaved the heads of newly admitted novices, and he has a strong interest in matters of monastic order. For each rule in the Pratimoksha, Kashyapa asks Upali to cite the Buddha's ruling as well as all the circumstances that led to the rule. Upali's recitation is the foundation of the *Vinaya*. For the teachings of the Dharma, Kashyapa questions Ananda, the Buddha's cousin and personal attendant. In addition to his proximity to the Buddha, Ananda is renowned for his prodigious memory. It was said that he could recite sixty thousand words of the Buddha without omitting a single syllable. Beginning each with "so I have heard," Ananda relates each of the many occasions in which he has heard the Buddha give teachings. The lengthy answers of Upali and Ananda to Kashyapa's prompts are then memorized and recited together by the entire assembly of monks. These form two of the three baskets of the fundamental Buddhist canon.

As with the Vedic corpus, the remembered words of the Buddha Shakyamuni that filled these two baskets comprised an enormous compilation. While some portions such as the Pratimoksha formed a common core of memorized knowledge, it was not plausible for all monks to learn all the Dharma and *Vinaya*. From an early period in its history, the Sangha began to develop a division of spiritual labor based on personal predilections and abilities. These different monastic specialists are cited in both texts and inscriptions.[18] Some monks and nuns specialized in meditation. Some chose isolated lives alone in the forest. Some took after Upali and served as experts in the disciplinary codes. Some became esteemed for their guidance and preaching to others, like the nun Patachara. The monks who specialized in the memorization and transmission of the Buddhist texts were known as reciters (*bhanakas*). Like the Smarta Brahmins, they took on the crucial task of preserving the cultural memory of the Sangha, grounded on the remembered words of the Buddha.

Though fidelity of transmission was clearly important to the Buddhists, it took a different direction than the transmission of the Veda. The Buddha Shakyamuni taught in the spoken language of his region, Magadhi, but he encouraged his traveling disciples to proclaim his teachings in the languages or dialects of their listeners. As a result, the words of the Buddha came to be reincarnated in multiple linguistic forms as the Sangha expanded its reach. However, one language was off limits for recitation: the sacerdotal language of Vedic Sanskrit.[19] In an episode related in the *Vinaya*, two newly converted monks from the Brahmin class request permission to recite the words of the Buddha as *chandas*, the form of the Vedic hymns, so they could be chanted more beautifully. The Buddha is firm in prohibiting this: "Monks, the buddhavachana must not be put into the form of chandas. I prescribe that all monks should learn the words of the Buddha thoroughly, each in their own pronunciations" (CV 5.33.1).

The Buddha's prohibition points to a fundamental distinction that the early Buddhists wished to make. The Veda consists fundamentally of holy sound (*brahman*), and so transmission of the Veda in its original language with phonetic exactitude is crucial. The Buddha's teaching is fundamentally concerned to convey meaning. To spread the teachings, the meanings can be rendered in new linguistic media. When disagreements arise, the monks should "set meaning beside meaning" to resolve the dispute. So in the Mauryan and post-Mauryan periods, the words of the Buddha came to be conveyed in multiple languages throughout the Indian subcontinent and even beyond. Only later, in the Kushana Era of the first two centuries CE, when the Sanskrit language had been decoupled from its exclusive ties to Vedic culture, would Buddhist writers begin to use Sanskrit as a primary medium for Buddhist teachings.

Religious Culture of the Buddhist Nuns

In her "inspired utterance" (*udana*), the Buddhist nun Chanda says that her preceptor, the nun Patachara, has pointed her toward the "highest goal." She appears to have found it, too, since she knows the "three things that most don't know" and that nothing stains her heart. In the same collection of songs, other nuns of the early Buddhist female order speak of being "cool, free." Some proclaim that they have crossed over the flood of worldly suffering. One nun exclaims, "There is nothing better than the happiness of nibbana."[20]

The capacity of females to attain the highest religious states, however, was by no means taken for granted in early India. Of course, we have to assume that women acted in countless ways within the religious cultures of ancient India. But in those communities that succeeded in passing on written evidence from this early period, the possibility of female spiritual attainment was debated and often dismissed. In establishing an order of female mendicants alongside the male one, the early Buddhists endorsed the idea that females were indeed capable, just as men were, of following the religious path to the highest goal that the Buddha Shakyamuni had attained. This opened the way for the first generation of nuns like Patachara and Chanda. The establishment of the female Sangha, however, was an ambivalent one. The Buddha had to be cajoled into doing the right thing, according to the tradition, and even then placed strictures on the autonomy of the nuns.

Women and the Highest State

Within the patriarchal society of the early Indo-Aryans, the Vedas formed the path to religious success. And the Vedas, we have seen, were enclosed within a fence of social restrictions. Those outside the three twice-born classes—Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas—were excluded from hearing or learning the sacred

Vedic words. This restriction applied to those in the Shudra (or servant) class and to all those communities outside the Indo-Aryan cultural sphere. The same restriction applied to women of all classes.

Loyal to this Vedic tradition, the Smarta Brahmin literature of the Dharmasutras limited female ritual action to a subordinate role. The Vedas were off-limits to Brahmin females, and so they were not capable of performing sacrificial rites on their own. As part of a Brahmin household couple, a wife played a necessary but secondary role in assisting her husband in carrying out his Vedic duties. This included, most importantly, giving birth and raising and consecrating a male child to continue the lineage. This was her *stri-dharma*, her Dharma as a woman.

For the early Jains, the question of whether one could reach the highest goal, Kaivalya or Moksha, while in a female body prompted a major controversy. It was connected with a fundamental issue of rigor: How far did the renunciatory vow of nonpossession extend? What constituted a possession for a Jain mendicant? And this question, in turn, was at the center of the primary split within the Jain order—one still in force today—between the Digambaras (or "sky-clad" Jains) and the Shvetambaras (or "white-robed" Jains). The roots of this schism go back, according to some, to the Mauryan period.[21]

Mahavira, all Jains agree, had been a naked mendicant when he attained liberation. For him, the vow of nonpossession extended to all clothing. Within the early Jain community, the Digambaras contended that they were adhering most closely to the path of Mahavira. Digambara monks allowed themselves only a small whiskbroom and a water gourd, which they classified as not actually possessions. Monks were necessarily naked, as Mahavira had been. The Shvetambaras held that mendicants could either be naked or wear white robes. For them, white robes should be considered simply a component of the monastic life, not a possession as such.

Males could be naked in public, but never females. So, for the Digambaras, it was not possible for a female to become a full-fledged mendicant. In their view, a female could be, at most, a celibate (and clothed) lay woman. Only a human who had fully renounced all possessions could gain Moksha. Digambara females, disallowed from renouncing their possession of clothing, were excluded from this highest goal. The Shvetambaras, by allowing white clothing and classifying it as a nonpossession, opened the door to a Jain order of female mendicants. Female Jain ascetics, just as much as males, were capable of attaining the three jewels, or conditions of Moksha: right views, right knowledge, and right conduct. Evidently, many women did take this Jain renunciatory path. In the early *Kalpasutra* account of the life of Mahavira, as maintained in the Shvetambara canon, the Jain community at the time of his death included fourteen thousand Shramana males and thirty-six thousand female mendicants. The numbers here may be hyperbolic, but the proportions—nuns as nearly three-quarters of the mendicant order—clearly point to a significant presence of female renouncers among the early Jains.

Mahaprajapati Gotami and the Female Buddhist Order

The early Buddhists accepted the capacity of women to attain the highest goal. As a "middle path" when it came to possessions allowed to renouncers, they were not troubled by issues of female monastic clothing. But they were troubled by issues of the relationship of male and female members of the Sangha. Women formed a female disciplinary community, but it had to be subordinated to the male community. The *Vinaya* tells the story of the founding of the female Sangha.

The protagonist in the origin story of the Buddhist female order is Mahaprajapati Gotami, the aunt of the Buddha Shakyamuni.[22] When the Buddha's mother Maya died while the Buddha was an infant, her sister Mahaprajapati had stepped in to nurse and raise the child. Many years later, after the Buddha's enlightenment, Mahaprajapati decides to become a mendicant within her foster son's growing community. At the time the Buddha is staying in an ashram near her home, Kapilavastu. She approaches him, bows respectfully, and requests that women be allowed to go forth into the homeless state under the Buddha's doctrine and discipline. The Buddha refuses permission. Mahaprajapati requests a second and then a third time, and the Buddha refuses each time. Mahaprajapati goes away in tears.

Later, the Buddha and his entourage have moved on to Vaishali, and Mahaprajapati takes matters into her own hands. She shaves off her hair, puts on the orange robes of the Sangha, gathers together a posse of like-minded women, and leaves home with her female followers to find the Buddha at Vaishali. In effect, she has already taken the first step in Buddhist initiation, that of going forth, or pravrajya. After the long trek from Kapilavastu, she stands outside the assembly hall in Vaishali with swollen feet, covered with dust, weeping. The Buddha's dedicated assistant Ananda sees Mahaprajapati there and asks what is troubling her. She explains her predicament. Ananda intervenes on her behalf. Approaching the Buddha, he requests that women be allowed to join the Sangha. Again the Buddha refuses three times.

The persistent Ananda now tries a new tack. "Is it possible," he asks, "for women—when they have renounced their homes and entered into the homeless state, and live according to the Dharma and the Vinaya taught by the Tathagata—to realize for themselves the four fruits of conversion, up to the state of Arhat?" (CV 10.1.3) Faced with the general question of female capacity for enlightenment, the Buddha answers in the affirmative. Ananda continues his plea: Mahaprajapati has already proven herself of great service to the Buddha in his earlier life, as aunt and wet nurse. He owes her this. The Buddha finally accedes to the request, but with conditions. Mahaprajapati may establish a female Sangha, provided she accept eight "heavy rules" (*guru-dharma*). Ananda reports back to Mahaprajapati, who gratefully accepts the eight rules. And in so doing, the *Vinaya* says, she receives the *upasampada* ordination, the completion of her initiation into the Buddhist Sangha.

The *Vinaya* account conveys the agency and persistence of Mahaprajapati and her status as leader of a group of female aspirants. It emphasizes the Buddha's unambiguous recognition of the spiritual capacity of women, but in other respects it reflects a deep ambivalence about the female Sangha. The shaving of heads and donning of robes may erase some of the most visible gender differences between Buddhist nuns and monks. The eight heavy rules, however, establish a clear hierarchy by which the male community will retain authority over the female one. The first rule of deference sets the tone: "A nun, even one of a hundred years standing, shall salute respectfully, stand up, fold hands in Anjali, and give homage to a monk, even one who has just been admitted to the order" (CV 10.1.4). The gender hierarchy of the surrounding society reappears within the Buddhist Sangha. This is in part a matter of Buddhist public relations. When Mahaprajapati later suggests as an alternative that deference be based solely on seniority in the order, irrespective of gender, the Buddha firmly declares this impossible. "Even those other Shramana groups, who teach bad Dharmas, do not allow females to act in this way. So how could the Tathagata permit it?" (CV 10.3.3) The female order may even be a liability. After allowing Mahaprajapati's ordination and formation of the women's community, the Buddha reflects on the longevity of his Dharma. Without a female order, his Dharma might last a thousand years; with a female order, he speculates, it will last only five hundred years.

The women who join the Buddhist Sangha in its early years, however, see matters in a less ambivalent light.

Songs and Lives of the Nuns

The *Therigatha*, part of the Pali *Sutta Nikaya*, contains songs (*gatha*) ascribed to about one hundred female elders (*theri*), enlightened nuns living at the time of the Buddha Shakyamuni. (There is a parallel *Theragatha* of the male elders.) The nuns sing verses of personal witness and exhortation directed at other members of the female order. According to Buddhist tradition, these songs were collected and recited at the first Buddhist council. As "inspired utterances" they were transmitted by members of the female order, as a community of reciters. The songs form a remarkable collection, the earliest anthology of women's poetry in world literature. As a historical document, they present a compelling window into female life in early India, both outside and inside the Buddhist Sangha.

If the first noble truth is suffering or discontentment (*duhkha*), and the first step on the Buddhist path is to recognize this most basic truth, then female life in early India provided many opportunities to take that step. Looking back on their earlier lives, these enlightened nuns speak of the many ways they have suffered. Duhkha may be a universal human experience, but the nuns ground it in the specifics of their lives as females. For housewives there is the "mortar and pestle," a metonym for the grinding drudgery of daily household tasks. For the servant Punna, there are the endless demands of a master and a mistress who beat her with sticks and angry words. There is the restless desire of sexuality and, for some, the husbands who incessantly demand it. For Isidasi it is a faithless husband, and for Uppalavanna it is the perverse sharing of her husband between herself and her daughter. For Sona, there is the pain and exhaustion of giving birth to ten sons.

The loss of sons and family is the crushing blow for many, including Chanda, Patachara, and Patachara's many followers. It can lead to social exile and to psychic derangement. The nun Vasetthi recalls:

> I was wounded by grief for my son,
> mind unhinged, mad,
> without clothes, hair unkempt,
> I walked from place to place.
> Resting on heaps of garbage in the streets,
> in cemeteries, on highways
> I wandered for three years,
> always hungry and thirsty.
> (Hallisey 2015: 77)

For Vasetthi, already homeless, it is a fortuitous sighting of the Buddha that sets her on a new kind of homeless path, much as Chanda's encounter with Patachara does for her.

Among the female Elders are four former courtesans. Freed from married life, these women have been accustomed to a degree of autonomy, but it is a fragile independence. No matter how successful they may have been in their work, it eventually leads to duhkha. Addhakasi, whose name means "half-Kashi," recalls with pride that her price had once been all the wealth of Kashi (or Varanasi) itself. But by taking on too many customers she lost her value, and she grew weary of using her beauty as a commodity. The most famous courtesan of Vaishali, Ambapali, reflects on the impermanence of physical beauty. Reciting a careful litany of the deterioration of each part of her once-lovely body, Ambapali concludes:

> This body was once like that,
> now feeble with age and fallen from its pride,
> it is the home of many sufferings,
> like an old house, the plaster falling down.
> It's just as the Buddha, the speaker of truth, said,
> nothing different from that.
> (Hallisey 2015: 141)

The Buddha's core tenet of universal transience plays itself out in the alluring body of the courtesan deluxe.

To join the Buddhist Sangha, a woman must first go forth into homelessness. She must break with long-standing habits and social conventions. Some women break out, or rather are broken out, by deaths in their families. They wander as destitute beggars, like Chanda or Vasetthi. This kind of involuntary homelessness offers no satisfactory refuge. For the already-wandering women and the homebound ones alike, there is often a catalytic encounter that leads them to the refuge of the Buddhist community. After giving birth to ten sons, Sona seeks out a nun for instruction in the Dharma. Sometimes just hearing the Dharma is enough. The metalworker's daughter Subha hears the Dharma when she is still young, quickly comprehends the four noble truths through her own effort and experiences an inner transformation.

> Right then I found that I had
> a great dislike for all that my senses find pleasing,
> I was afraid of my own body,
> and I longed for freedom from it all.
> (Hallisey 2015: 173)

So she quickly leaves behind her relatives and her family wealth and finds her way to join the Sangha.

Joining the order is not just the end of worldly life, it is also the beginning of a new one. The nuns become part of a disciplinary community where they receive instruction and adopt practices aimed at overcoming suffering. The women who have taken pleasure in their physical beauty, like Abhirupananda (whose name means exactly that), are counseled to reimagine their bodies as sick, dirty, and foul. “Use what is unpleasant to cultivate the mind,” they are taught (Hallisey 2015: 19). The Elder Sakula recalls some of the ways she has trained herself. She has given up excitement and anger, learned to remember former lives, and come to observe herself as if from outside. “I saw my experiences as if they were not my own, born from a cause, destined to disappear” (Hallisey 2015: 61).

The elders also reflect on the doubts and anxieties they have experienced as nuns. Often they dramatize these as dialogues with Mara (“causer of death”), the divine personification of all the obstacles they face along the way. Mara may manifest himself to question their commitment to celibacy and to urge them to enjoy the pleasures of sexuality while they still have the chance. With Uppalavanna, Mara exploits her fear of being alone. Isn’t she afraid of being accosted by a scoundrel? Mara also argues with Soma that women are incapable of reaching the highest goal, especially someone “with only two fingers’ worth of wisdom.” Assailed by this self-doubt, the stalwart Soma replies:

> What does being a woman have to do with it?
> What counts is that the heart is settled
> and that one sees what really is.
> (Hallisey 2015: 45)

She goes on to declare that Mara, the evil one, is defeated.

By overcoming obstacles and through disciplined practice, these accomplished nuns may experience epiphanies, flashes of transformative insight. In her remarkable poem, the Elder Patachara recounts the moments of her enlightenment. At first she wonders why she has not experienced freedom, despite doing all that the Buddha recommends. Then:

> While washing my feet I made the water useful in another way,
> by concentrating on it move from the higher ground down.
> (Hallisey 2015: 67)

So, too, with humans—some are absorbed more quickly into the sand than others, as her own children had been. She reins in her mind “as one would do with a thoroughbred horse” and goes into her hut.

> First I looked at the bed, then I sat on the couch,
> I used a needle to pull out the lamp’s wick.
> Just as the lamp went out, my mind was free.

As preceptor to other nuns, also grieving for lost children, she urges them to wash their own feet and to recognize the transience of human life. Nurturing grief is also a form of attachment, to be abandoned in its time. Patachara's instruction succeeds, as five hundred other nuns proclaim.

> She pulled out the arrow that was hard for me to see,
> the one that I nourished in my heart,
> she expelled the grief for a son,
> the grief that had overwhelmed me.
> (Hallisey 2015: 75)

What is the state to which one goes when all the arrows have been pulled out? All the elders in this collection were enlightened, and their poems were classified as inspired utterances. So how do they describe the good life they have found within the Buddhist Sangha? Many of the songs speak of what they have overcome: the cravings, the sexual desires, the ties of worldly life. They have gotten rid of all that fouls the heart. Suffering prompts them to delight in diligent practice. They split open the mass of mental darkness. Through discipline they tame the mind. The Brahmin nun Dantika observes an elephant and its mahout.

> A man holding a goad told the elephant, "Hold up your foot,"
> and the elephant put its foot forward and the man climbed on.
> (Hallisey 2015: 37)

Seeing how the untamed was tamed, she does the same with her mind. They come to see things as they really are. With this comes a sense of assurance: what the Buddha taught has been accomplished. They have overcome the cycle of death and rebirth. And with that, the elders are left to enjoy a peace of mind, cool and free.

7

Popular Religious Cultures during the Shunga Era (200 BCE–0 CE)

AT THE ENTRANCE OF THE modest Vidisha Museum, a massive nine-foot stone statue greets visitors (**Fig. 13**). Standing like a colossus with two feet set firmly on the ground, this ample, fleshy, powerful male figure gazes outward with gaping eyes. He wears a dhoti tied with a large rope-like belt, and his upper body is partly covered by a gathered scarf crossing his chest. His figure is adorned with a broad necklace, five bracelets on his forearms, and heavy spiral earrings. His hair is tied in a tilted bun atop his head. He holds in his left hand a bag filled with coins; his right hand is broken off at the wrist. Altogether he displays a formidable and regal bearing, redolent of health, affluence, and power.[1]

This freestanding sculpture was found in the river sands at the confluence of the Bes and Betwa rivers, the center of ancient Vidisha, one hot summer in the 1960s when the river waters had receded due to a prolonged dry period. Scholars identify the statue as an image of Kubera, chief of the Yakshas, and date its creation to the period of Shunga rule. In his own time, Kubera Yaksha would have presided in his own shrine or *chaitya*, within Vidisha city, where he could receive the offerings of those human followers who wished to honor him and partake in some of the wealth and worldly abundance he embodied.

Kubera Yaksha introduces us to a broad company of autochthonous divine beings who populated the northern Indian landscape during the Shunga Era. These include weighty stone Yaksha figures like Kubera, as well as their female Yakshi counterparts. Inside the Vidisha Museum stands a Yakshi image found alongside Kubera in the riverbed. Like her consort, she poses firmly on her two feet in a frontal posture. Her physique is ample and fleshy, and her body is adorned

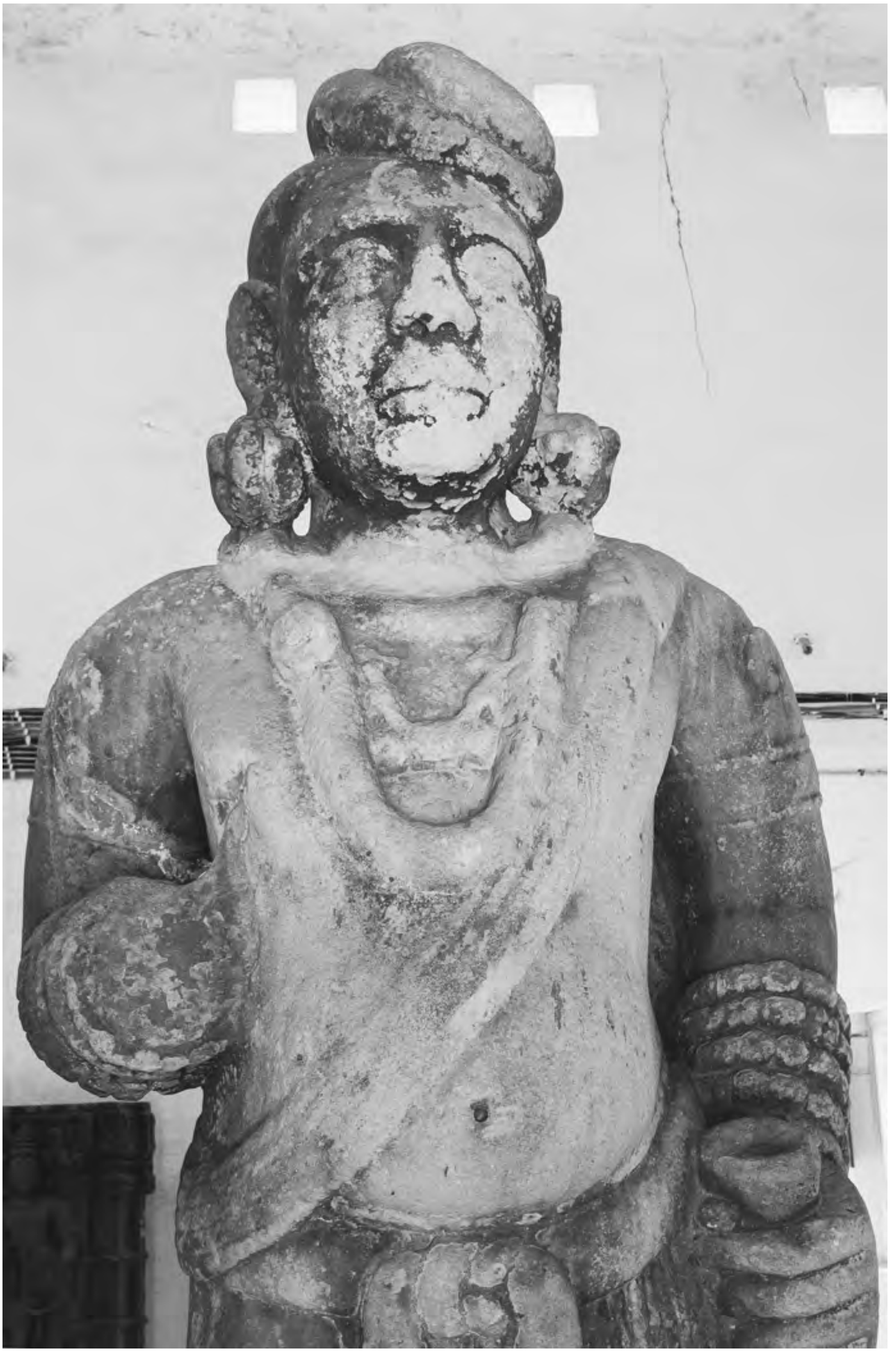


FIGURE 13. Kubera Yaksha, Vidisha, ca. 1st century BCE. Vidisha District Museum, Vidisha, Madhya Pradesh.

with heavy ornamental belt, necklace falling between her breasts, armlets, bracelets, anklets, and bead-shaped earrings. She holds in her left hand the branch of a mango tree rich with leaves and fruit.

Large freestanding statues of Yakshas and Yakshis of the Shunga Era have been unearthed in numerous places across northern India, and they now reside in museums from Vidisha to Mathura, Allahabad, Patna, all the way to Kolkata, where another colossal Yakshi found in Vidisha was transported in the nineteenth century (**Fig. 14**). They share certain physical features. The male Yakshas are tall, powerful figures standing in an upright frontal posture. They are richly dressed and adorned in the manner of royalty. They have two arms and often hold signs of wealth, like Kubera's sack of coins. Yakshis are healthy, voluptuous females. They wear broad jeweled belts that hold up diaphanous lower garments, and they are ornamented just as sumptuously as their male counterparts. Often they hang onto the branch of a tree, or wind their leg around a tree trunk. The collective bearing of these Yakshas and Yakshis is one of health and abundance, associated with the fertile productivity of nature. As the art historian A. K. Coomaraswamy put it, their "essential quality is one of energy, without introspection or spiritual aspiration."[2] They beckon to a worldly good life, not to renunciatory transcendence.

Along with Yakshas and Yakshis, we find numerous snake deities, male Nagas and female Naginis, usually sculpted in stone as anthropomorphic images with telltale snake elements. Freestanding Naga and Nagini sculptures of Shunga times are similar to the Yakshas and Yakshis. They are large, heavy, freestanding figures, in most respects human in form, but with the body of a coiled snake along their backsides and a canopy of cobra-hoods spreading over their heads. Near Vidisha, such snake deities have turned up in Gulgaon and Nagauri.[3] The six-foot Nagauri Naga now stands in a thicket on a rocky hillside, not far from the Sanchi hilltop stupa, in a simple open-air shrine marked off by a rectangle of stones. Smears of sindur, shells of coconut, a packet of incense, and a small flag all point to the modest veneration this snake deity continues to receive (**Plate 5**). Significantly, Naga and Nagini images are often found near bodies of water. Also among the array of deities, much smaller but vastly more abundant, are the prolific terracotta female figurines, little goddesses, fabricated in Shunga times and found underground throughout the northern Indian landscape from Taxila in the northwest to Tamralipti on the Bengal coast in the east.

Altogether, these stone and terracotta images attest to vigorous and widespread religious cultures centered on autochthonous or earthly deities. These are often labeled "popular" or "folk" gods and goddesses. It is clear that such deities and the practices surrounding them have existed at all times in the religious history

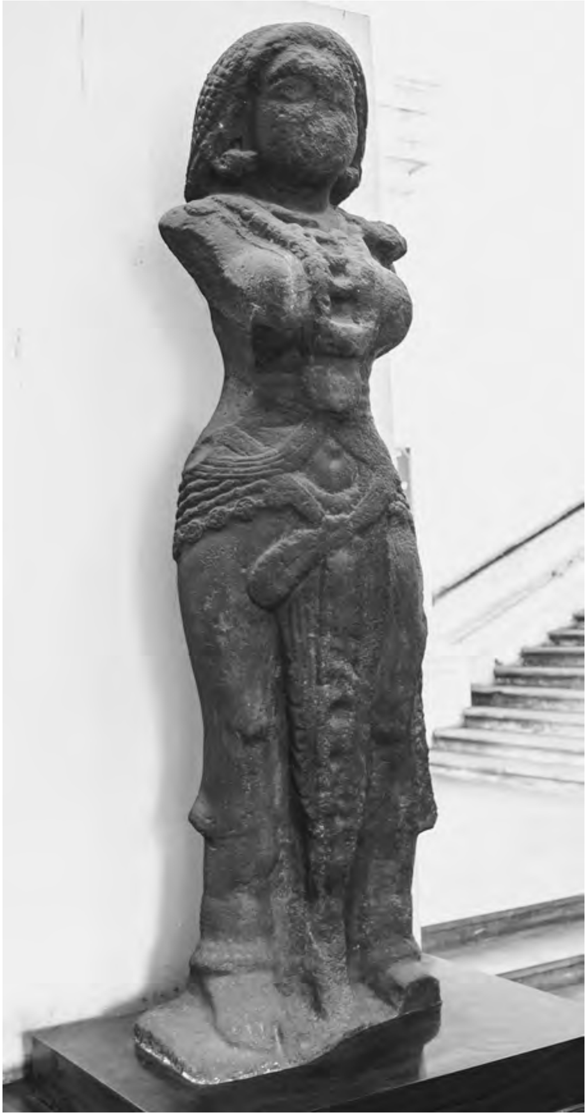


FIGURE 14. Yakshi from Vidisha, ca. 1st century BCE. Indian Museum, Kolkata.

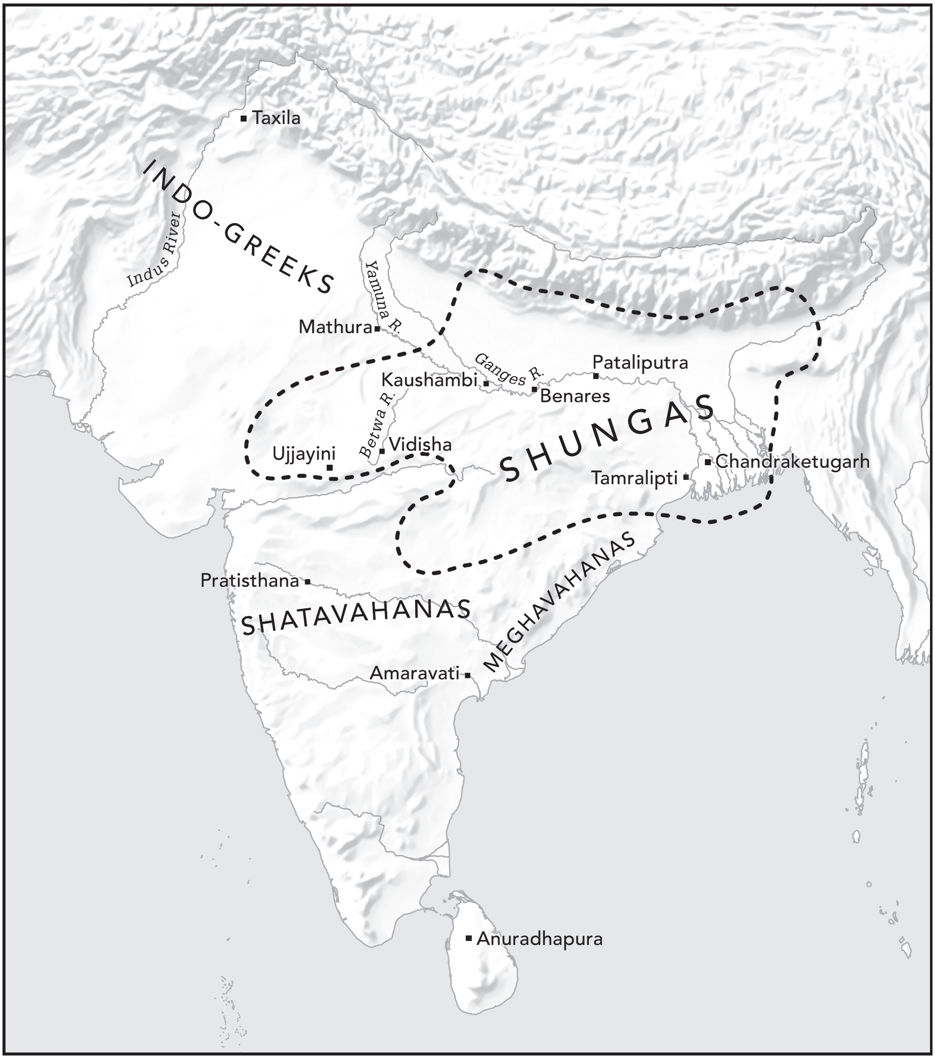
of India. It is also clear that these "popular" forms of religious culture have never been fully isolated or separated from the pan-Indian, literate, "high" religious traditions such as the Vedic, Buddhist, and Jain ones. We must bear in mind the interactions between what an earlier generation of anthropologists called the "great" and the "little" traditions of Indic religion. They explored processes of “Sanskritization,” of “universalization” and “parochialization.”[4] These undoubtedly point to real dynamics within the religious cultures of South Asia, as long as one does not reify great and little, high and low, as distinct or essential traditions. In any broad and inclusive history of religious cultures, all these—elite and popular, this-worldly and transcendental—must have their places.

Vidisha was one of the capital cities of the Shungas, the main dynastic successors to the Mauryans. This chapter centers on religious cultures of the Vidisha area during Shunga times, though it will also take in materials from further afield. The primary purpose is to explore popular forms of religion during the period, starting with earthly deities like Yakshas and Nagas. We will look more closely also at the small terracotta female figurines, whom I will call “little goddesses.” Five miles outside of Vidisha city is the major Buddhist stupa at Sanchi, where we see an expansive form of Buddhism that thoroughly mixes monastic and lay practices, so-called elite and popular, in a single flourishing religious culture. Finally, an inscribed pillar erected in Vidisha will introduce us to the emergence of a new theistic religious community, the Bhagavatas devoted to the rising god Vasudeva. Throughout this chapter, I will foreground material evidence—the physical remnants of religious practices—rather than textual sources.

The Shunga Era

In 184 BCE, Pushyamitra, the commander in chief of the army under the Mauryan emperor Brihadratha, carried out a coup d’etat and assumed sovereignty. In the *Harshacharita*, a later literary work, the poet Bana provides a reference of the dramatic event. The general had the entire army assembled in the capital on the pretext of displaying to Brihadratha the full extent of Mauryan military might. Then Pushyamitra “pounded his foolish master” and took over power.[5] This brought a final demise to the formidable Mauryan empire after a reign of 137 years.

Pushyamitra established a new ruling dynasty, the Shungas, in northern India. It would last 112 years under ten Shunga kings, until this dynasty was usurped by the Kanvas in 72 BCE. Kanva rule lasted until 27 BCE. Neither the Shungas nor the Kanvas ever recovered the broad subcontinental reach of the Mauryans. We learn of many other dynastic claimants who rose and fell during the period: the Shakas in western India, the Shatavahanas in the Deccan, the Meghavahanas in Orissa, and the Indo-Greeks in the northwestern parts of the subcontinent (**Map 10**). This period of two centuries, from roughly 200 BCE to the beginnings of the new millennium, sometimes appears as a



MAP 10. India in the Shunga Era

period of political fragmentation after the stability and pan-Indian range of Mauryan rule. Some historians have labeled this an era of foreign invasions, as if the national lines of India had already been drawn. Here I will call it the Shunga Era, for the central dynasty of the period. However, I do not wish to imply that the Shungas, or any other polity, exercised political or cultural hegemony over these two centuries.

During this period the social and cultural processes set in motion by the Mauryans continued. Zones of agricultural production spread, and new cities appeared and grew. Indo-Aryan cultural norms began to reach beyond the Indo-Gangetic plains, incorporating some groups and alienating others. Local and long-distance trade increased. Especially significant was the growing trade with the expansive Roman empire to the west, both overland and by sea. Socially, culturally, and religiously, the Shunga Era was one of expansion, not of decay or retreat.

As successors to the Mauryans, the Shungas took Pataliputra, then the greatest city of India, as their capital. They held sway over most of the Ganges-Yamuna area, as far as Bengal in the east. They also extended their domain to the southwest, into Avanti and the Narmada River region, and they adopted the old city of Vidisha as their secondary capital. Vidisha (later renamed Besnagar) lies at the confluence of two rivers, the Betwa and the Bes, southern tributaries of the Yamuna. Fertile soil had attracted an early agricultural settlement there, but it was during the Mauryan period that it grew into an urban site. Vidisha became an important stop along the *dakshinapatha*, the primary southern trade route leading from the Ganges plains southwest to the seaports along the west coast. As a Shunga capital and trade center, Vidisha and its surroundings became prosperous in the two centuries BCE. The Shungas constructed a mile-long fortification, one hundred feet in width at the base, stretching between the two river banks, effectively protecting the city on all sides.

The Shunga rulers, belonging to the Brahmin class, are said to have performed Vedic Horse Sacrifices several times as a means of ritually enacting their imperial sway. Later Buddhist texts like the *Divyavadana* claim that Pushyamitra and his successors persecuted Buddhist monks and tried to destroy their establishments. Historians have sometimes portrayed the Shungas as "Hindu revivalists," replacing the Buddhist-friendly Mauryans. But the Shunga Era was by no means one of simple orthodox Vedic restoration.

In fact, it was a period of remarkable complexity and change, one of innovation, interaction, and debate among multiple religious communities. Certainly there were groups of Brahmins loyal to the Vedic tradition. Smarta Brahmins organized themselves and their villages to live according to the Dharma as they defined it. At the same time, Buddhist institutions grew and flourished throughout northern India and into the Deccan. Buddhist monks and nuns formalized their monastic codes and transmitted the Dharma as they understood it. During this period, too, burial mounds containing the physical remains of the Buddha and other eminent monks became vigorous centers of religious veneration and sculptural efflorescence. Other Shramana communities like the Jains and the

Ajivakas also established centers of practice. We also see, during the Shunga period, the emergence of a new form of theism, linked to the Vedic tradition but differing markedly from it, that begins to articulate itself both in material practice and literary works. The great Sanskrit epics that take shape during this period, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, seek to comprehend and contain everything, and they came to serve as pillars of a new "Hindu" religious formation. And throughout the landscape of northern India, we can find, in the ground, the remnants of once-widespread devotional practices involving Yakshas and Yakshis, Nagas and Naginis, earthly goddesses, and other autochthonous deities.

A Landscape Filled with Deities

Who were the Yakshas and Yakshis, Nagas and Naginis? What can we infer from their looming physical presence about the religious landscape of Vidisha or northern India in the Shunga Era? Clearly, significant resources and considerable artistic skill went into the fabrication of these large stone sculptures. In fact, they are among the very earliest extant freestanding figural sculptures in the subcontinent. Some of them evidently resided within the Shunga capital. There is every reason to consider them to be icons of venerated beings, with capacities and powers surpassing those of humans. They were divine or semidivine beings, however we wish to define those terms. But we do not have written texts produced by their votaries. Either their worshippers did not compose them or they did not organize themselves sufficiently as recitative communities to transmit them over time. The only written evidence about these divine beings is preserved in the works of outsiders or opponents, who refer to them with some degree of distance or derision. And we also have the unwritten texts of the icons themselves.

Vaidika *and* Laukika *Deities*

Modern scholars of Indian art have used various terms to classify these beings: popular deities, folk gods, rural cults, local genii, spirit deities, expressions of the "little tradition." None of these are entirely adequate, and some are actively misleading. It will be better to start from terms used by a contemporary observer. In his *Mahabhashya*, or "big commentary," on the work of Panini's grammar, composed around 200 BCE, Patanjali makes a distinction between *vaidika* and *laukika*.[6] For the grammarian, this is first of all a difference between languages. Vaidika language refers to the restricted liturgical language of the Vedas and the refined Sanskrit language perfected by the application of grammatical principles of Panini and his successors. In Patanjali's time, Sanskrit remained preeminently the language learned and employed by male Brahmins devoted to the Vedas. Laukika denotes everyday spoken or vernacular languages. These natural (*prakriti*) languages may have derived from an earlier form of Sanskrit, but they are not governed by the same restrictions in usage or by explicit grammatical prescriptions.

The distinction of vaidika and laukika can be extended to refer to the divine world as well. *Vaidika* deities would be the well-known pantheon of gods praised in the Vedic texts, recipients of Vedic sacrifice, such as Indra, Agni, and Soma. These wide-ranging nomadic deities could be present in many places, but they did not take on physical embodiments. They remained invisible to their sacrificing worshippers. But the vaidika gods were very much alive for the Vedic priests who invoked them, for the Smarta Brahmins who memorized and recited their hymns of praise, and for those loyal to the religious culture of the Vedas.

For other gods outside this Vedic group, Patanjali suggests the Sanskrit term derived from *loka*, which designates the world, as in the three *lokas* of earth, atmosphere, and heaven. Loka also denotes the earth itself and, by extension, the humans who dwell on it. Laukika could therefore be translated as worldly, earthly, chthonic, to point to the connection of these beings with the natural landscape and their association with worldly well-being. Laukika could also be rendered as popular. They are deities "of the people"—to distinguish the nonrestricted human community who could take recourse to these gods—in contrast to the more exclusive Vedic deities. Here I will use the term "earthly" deities, to remind us of their grounded physical presence.

In another usage, the term "laukika" refers to aims or purposes of actions that are "this-worldly," such as wealth, prosperity, power, status, health, and well-being. These are distinguished from *alaukika* (nonworldly) aims, namely the world-transcending religious goals of release or liberation, designated by terms such as Nirvana, Kaivalya, and Moksha. Here, the earthly Yakshas, Yakshis, and the other laukika deities are primarily associated with worldly matters. Sometimes they are treated as dangerous agents of misfortune who must be propitiated to forestall illness or disaster. But properly honored, they are powerful beings, valuable allies to have on your side.

Vernacular Devotion

We can gain a sense of the breadth and style of the religious cultures surrounding these earthly deities from later Buddhist and Jain texts, among others. They were certainly widespread. One Buddhist work from the early centuries CE, the

Mahamayuri, lists nearly one hundred Yakshas and their primary locations, many of which are in the principal northern Indian cities of the period.[7] This was not just a rural or peripheral "little tradition." The *Arthashastra* of Kautilya recommends that city planners set out shrines for Yakshas and other earthly deities as part of the urban landscape. Often, it seems, Yakshas acted as tutelary deities guarding over human settlements.

These earthly beings were to be found in *chaityas*, or *devayatanas*, shrines of the gods, located either inside a city or outside, often under a tree considered sacred to the deity. An essential feature of the shrine was a stone table or altar. Some chaityas, but not all, featured anthropomorphic images of the deities, like Kubera Yaksha of Vidisha. Both aniconic and iconic forms of veneration were possible. A more elaborate chaitya might have wooden enclosing walls and entryways to demarcate the sacred space, and it might have thatched walls and roof to protect the deity within.[8] Structural shrines built of perishable materials two thousand years ago have not survived, of course, and so the only remnants of the chaityas are the great stone Yakshas and Yakshis that once stood inside them.

An early Jain work, the *Antagada Dasao*, recounts conversion stories that include brief descriptions of the worship of Yakshas. Outside the city of Rajagriha, goes one such story, a garland maker named Ajjunae owns a beautiful flower-garden. Near the garden stands a shrine with the image of the Yaksha Moggarapani, who holds in his hand a giant iron mace. Every morning at the start of his work, Ajjunae gathers flowers from his garden. Taking the very best flowers, he goes to the shrine of the Yaksha, falls on his knees, and offers the flowers. After that he would carry on with his trade. Similarly, the housewife Sulasa, devoted from a young age to the Yaksha Harinegameshi, has an image of the deity made. Every morning she bathes and does her morning ablutions, and with her robe still moist she approaches the icon, makes abundant offerings of flowers, falls on her knees, and does reverence. The narrative goes on to inform us that, on account of Sulasa's veneration, Harinegameshi is won over and, out of compassion, makes her pregnant.[9]

In the stories of Ajjunae and Sulasa and their earthly deities, we see early accounts of image veneration in South Asia. The veneration of images, in a general definition, "involves humans and other subjects showing respect and homage to objects that visually represent, point to, or embody sacred beings or realities held to be especially worthy of honor."[10] Here Ajjunae and Sulasa express their veneration through bodily actions and through material offerings directed toward physical images that, for them, embody those Yakshas. Flowers are the primary token of homage here, though, in other early accounts, incense, food, cloth, and other material items may also be given. The ritual protocol here differs in fundamental respects from Vedic sacrificial practice. There are no fire oblations here, no hymns or Vedic mantras, and no need of Brahmin priestly mediation. The divine recipient is made visible and materially present in the form of an icon, and offerings can be transmitted directly from worshipper to icon-deity. The outcome of this veneration is uncertain, since Yakshas are not entirely predictable beings, but in the case of Sulasa at least, the Yaksha does favor her with pregnancy, a highly desirable boon. The overall religious orientation here acknowledges natural powers embodied in earthly deities, and seeks to channel those powers toward human ends of well-being.

In his pioneering 1928 study, *Yakṣas*, Coomaraswamy calls this practice of image veneration *bhakti*. Yaksha worship, he argues, "was a Bhakti cult, with images, temples, altars, and offerings." The worship of Yakshas, Nagas, and goddesses formed "the natural source of the Bhakti elements common to the whole sectarian development which was taking place before the beginning of the Kuṣāna period."[11] Bhakti is a key term in Indic religious discourse and in scholarly studies of Indian religions. Most often, bhakti is translated in its religious usage as "devotion," but a look at a Sanskrit dictionary quickly indicates the word's broad semantic range: distribution, sharing, participation, belonging to, attachment, homage, trust, and love. As John Cort has insisted, Bhakti is an Indic religious modality that has been "differently understood and practiced in different times, places, and sects."[12] Like other key religious categories, the term bhakti was too important not to be reused, adapted, contested, and redefined by multiple Indian religious cultures. In Yaksha worship of the Shunga Era, as far as we are able to reconstruct it, we see the fundamentals of a ritual practice of devotion directed toward divine beings made manifest in physical icons. This is one form of bhakti—perhaps the earliest Indic form that has left physical evidence—but it is by no means the whole of it, nor the full "natural source" of later bhakti devotionalism. We will return to other devotional practices, theologies, and expressions of bhakti in later chapters.

The religious culture centered on earthly deities like Yakshas and Nagas, widespread and popular during the Shunga Era, existed alongside other religious groups with very different religious commitments and priorities, often in competition with one another. How did these others regard the Yakshas and their shrines? Smarta Brahmins were instructed to keep a respectful distance. The Grihyasutras recognize the existence of devayatanas, shrines of the earthly gods, and they recommend that pious Brahmin householders show due respect to them. However, they should not enter into direct ritual participation.[13] Buddhist and Jain Shramanas took a more engaged and competitive approach. Early Buddhist narratives describe the Buddha Shakyamuni occupying the shrines of the earthly deities, engaging in dialogues or contests with them, and seeking to convert them. We will return to the encounters of Shramana sages and laukika deities in a later section of this chapter.

Little Goddesses

In the Vidisha Museum reside the broken remnants of another species of earthly deities. These are small female figurines made of clay, decidedly less impressive than the great stone Yaksha at the front door.

These little clay goddesses may be small in stature, but they are remarkably numerous and widespread. Similar terracotta figurines dating from the Shunga period have been unearthed in excavation sites across northern India: from Taxila in the northwest, along the Ganges-Yamuna plains in Mathura, Kaushambi, Ahichatra, Bhita, and Pataliputra, east to the ancient coastal trading centers of Tamralipti (modern Tamluk) and Chandraketugarh in Bengal.[14] They reflect another side of the religious culture surrounding laukika deities of the period: domestic worship practices directed toward goddesses.

From Taxila to Tamralipti, Shunga Era terracotta figurines share broad physical characteristics. Made of molded and fired clay, they are diminutive in scale, not measuring more than a foot in height. Often the female figures rise in relief from plaques, and many of the plaques have holes near the top, convenient for hanging on walls. The goddesses present themselves forthrightly to the viewer. Many stand in stiff hieratic posture. Their proportions are ample but plausibly anthropomorphic; they do not have the highly stylized or impossible forms of the earlier female figurines found in Mehrgarh or Indus Valley sites. Clothing is largely diaphanous, and they always wear abundant jewelry. In many ways they are similar to the standing stone Yakshis of the same era, albeit in a different medium and at a very different scale.

While they all share general physical features, there are also important regional and local variations among the little terracotta goddesses, especially in their individual iconographies. Some goddesses hold fishes, others bear decorated fans, while still others balance infants on their hips. Some arise out of lotuses, or stand on top of lotuses, or hold lotuses in their hands. (The lotus—which takes root in pond-bottom muck, rises through murky water, and opens lustrously in the air above—is the ubiquitous Indic decorative motif evoking fertility and purity.) The most striking feature in many little goddesses is their extraordinary hair and headgear. Some wear fascinators that surpass any worn by the ladies at a British royal wedding. Sheafs of grain, or sets of weapons, or both, jut out from their coiffures. The Goddess of Abundance from Kaushambi, for example, bears corn bundles emerging from the left side of her headdress, and weapons from the right, and she has long braids of hair falling to her waist (**Fig. 15**). Scholars are not certain about the iconographic significance of these elaborate hair-pieces. However, all the iconographic elements together point to the individual association of these goddesses with distinctive aspects of worldly well-being: successful childbearing, physical health, prosperity in agriculture and fishing, and protection from dangerous forces.

Who were these little goddesses? What can they tell us about themselves and the religious culture in which they participated? In lieu of direct written accounts from the Shunga Era, some scholars have looked back in time, identifying them as new incarnations of an old Neolithic "Mother Goddess," or as aspects of an undifferentiated Indian "Great Goddess," or even more abstractly as representations of a "feminine principle." Others have looked ahead in time, postulating that they are proto-forms of named goddesses who would incarnate themselves in later texts, starting around the fifth century CE, such as Shri-Lakshmi and Durga. The little goddesses no doubt do bear some genealogical affiliation with later Hindu deities, as well as with Buddhist and Jain ones, but this teleological identification takes away from their own historical specificity. For our purposes, it will be better to follow the lead of Naman Ahuja and regard these terracotta female figurines as "important communicators of aspects of Indian religious expression contemporary with their use and production" in their own time.[15] But to see just what they communicate requires close looking.

The most remarkable of all the Shunga Era little goddesses have been found far from Vidisha, in the ancient Bengali port towns of Tamralipti and Chandraketugarh. Evidently the Chandraketugarh region was an important center of craft and trade, for a great wealth of terracotta objects have turned up in its grounds. These objects include vessels, urns, toys, and an impressive array of little goddesses. The figures were produced using terracotta molds, into which a thick clay slurry was poured. When dry, the plaque was pried out and could be given further decorative details. Then it was fired to give it greater strength and stability. This technique yielded terracotta figures of exquisite detail and workmanship.

A distinguished example of Chandraketugarh artistry, a nine-inch terracotta plaque of "Goddess who bestows riches," now resides in New York at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (**Fig. 16**). Here the goddess occupies the center of the plaque, facing the viewer, standing upright though not stiffly so, with one hand on her waist and the other outstretched. She is significantly larger than the other figures who share the space of the plaque. She wears abundant jewelry, as do all the little goddesses, with a thick necklace, strands of pearls crossing her breasts,

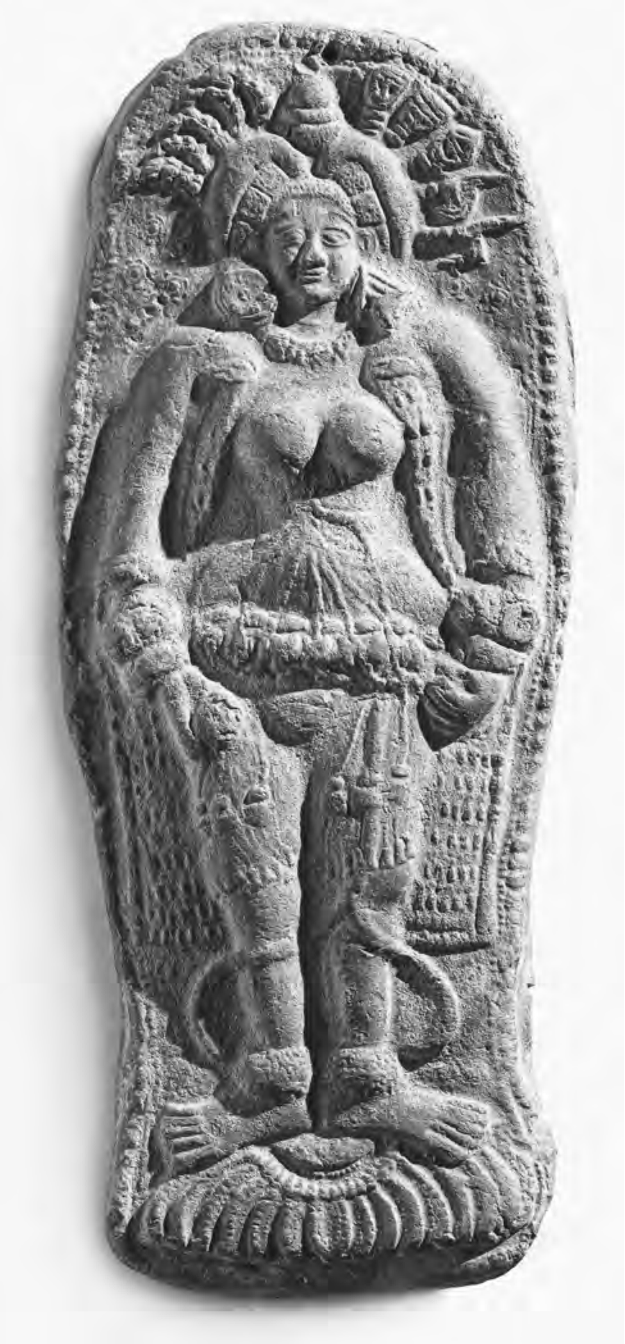


FIGURE 15. Goddess of Abundance, terracotta, Kaushambi, Uttar Pradesh, ca. 2nd century BCE. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Gift of Paul F. Walter (M.90.196.1). Photo copyright © Museum Associates/LACMA.

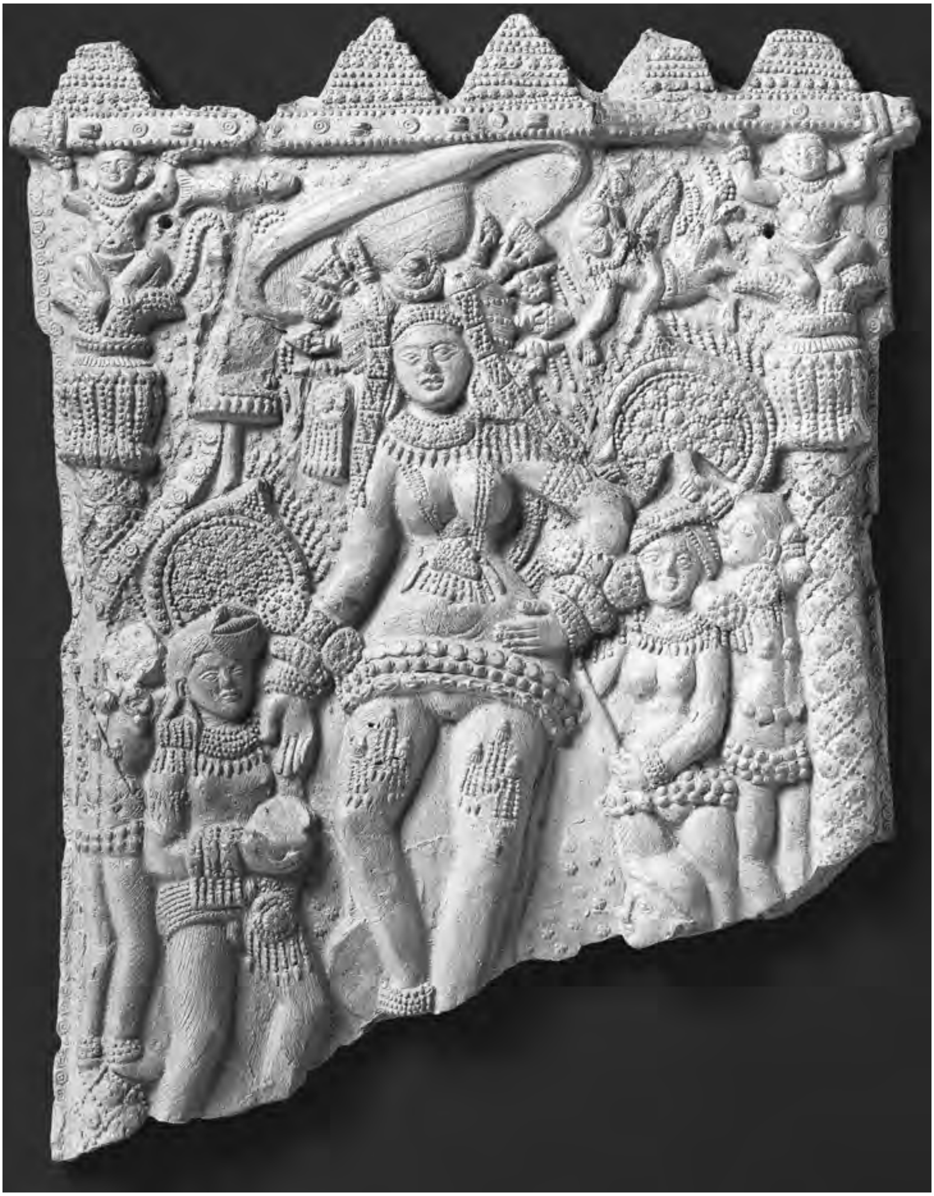


FIGURE 16. Goddess Who Bestows Riches, probably Sri Lakshmi, terracotta, Chandraketugarh, West Bengal, 1st century BCE to 1st century CE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Florence and Herbert Irving Gift, 1990 (1990.281).

armlets, bracelets, anklets, and a wide beaded belt holding a sheer lower garment. Her thick hair is arranged in two buns, with ten small weapons (trident, axe, elephant goad, and others) projecting out to the left and right.

The goddess stands in a shrine. Framing her are two decorated pillars topped by squatting male figures who support a flat roof capped by six pyramid-shaped piles. Within this shrine space, a female attendant lifts a parasol above the head of the goddess, a sure sign of her exalted status. Two other females nearby wave elaborately decorated fans. A smaller figure moves toward the goddess, holding a small offering bowl to her receptive hand. From above, a winged creature scatters flower petals onto the goddess. Near the roof on the left, a fish seems to be suspended in midair.

The "Goddess who bestows riches" tableau was intended for domestic religious usage. It is small in scale and made of clay, a substance of less prestige than stone or metal. Two small holes near the top indicate that it could be hung on a wall. But at the same time the plaque places the goddess in an imagined public shrine, where she receives the homage of other human and superhuman figures. To adapt a well-known phrase from anthropologist Clifford Geertz, it is both a terracotta model *for* goddess worship, and a model *of* worship. The goddess presents herself to the domestic worshipper as an icon, for worship. The plaque also presents a broader tableau of the goddess in a public shrine surrounded by other figures who are in the act of honoring the goddess.

For our historical view, "Goddess who bestows riches" offers a terracotta window into the popular religious culture revolving around laukika deities during the Shunga period. These unnamed little goddesses in clay, like the stone Yakshas and Yakshis, served as figures of veneration. While the larger earthly deities resided within shrines in public places, accessible to congregations of worshippers, the little goddesses evidently occupied a more domestic sphere. They seem to have had local identities, as far as we can tell, but they anticipate in their divine bearing and formative iconography the goddesses of pan-Indian scope who begin to appear in the religious institutions of the Buddhists, Jains, and Hindu theists in centuries to come.

The World in a Burial Mound

Five miles southwest from old Vidisha, a low sandstone hill rises three hundred feet above the river plains. In Shunga times and after, Sanchi hill (sometimes known as Chaityagiri, or "shrine-mountain") was a center of extraordinary Buddhist activity.

It may be that the Shunga rulers performed Vedic royal sacrifices, but there is no doubt that the Buddhist community thrived in the Vidisha area under their rule. Surrounding the capital city stands a remarkable group of Buddhist religious sites that flourished during Shunga rule, evidence of broad support for the Buddhist order. The "Bhilsa Topes" (as the pioneering British archeologist Alexander Cunningham designated them) or Vidisha-area stupa sites—Satdhara, Sonari, Bhojpur, and Andher, along with Sanchi—stand on low-rising hills forming a Buddhist outer belt that encircles a twelve-mile radius west and south of old Vidisha. Each location contains multiple stupas, with one principal stupa at each, formerly animated by the relics of the Buddha Shakyamuni or highly esteemed Buddhist teachers. Each site would have also housed communities of Buddhist monks or nuns, many belonging to the Hemavata school.[16] Of all the ancient stupas in the Vidisha area, and, for that matter, in all of India, the most luminous is known as the "Great Stupa" at Sanchi.

As with many Buddhist institutions in India, Sanchi lies outside an urban settlement but is within feasible walking distance. The pattern had been set, according to Buddhist tradition, by one of the first great lay-patrons of the order, the wealthy householder Anathapindika. Wishing to endow the Buddha and his followers with a place of residence in the city of Shravasti, he reflected: "What would be a good place for the Lord Buddha to reside, neither too far from a settlement nor too near, suitable for coming and going by monks and nuns, allowing all the good people to visit, not too crowded during the day and with little talk and little noise at night, suitable for meditation without disturbance by people or their breathing?" (CV 6.4.8) Accordingly, he donated to the Buddhist Sangha a suburban park, Jeta's Grove, a short distance outside the city, to refashion as a monastic retreat.

So, too, with Sanchi hill. Proximity would allow regular interaction between the monastic residents and the broader population. Separation would provide the seclusion suitable for the meditative practices of the order. Monks and nuns could go into town on their begging rounds; lay followers could venture out to the sacred Buddhist site for instruction and to pay respects to the remains of the Buddha and his dedicated disciples. The Sanchi hill setting also offered a ready source of sandstone for construction purposes, as well as a refuge from flooding rivers during the monsoons. This prime location served as a Buddhist monastic center and pilgrimage destination over many centuries, from the Mauryan period through Gupta times and into the early medieval period. In addition to the Great Stupa, the central religious structure, Sanchi hill became crowded with additional stupas, monastic residences, later temples, and smaller votive shrines.[17] The hilltop center seems to have been abandoned in early medieval times. British colonial officials like Cunningham—part archeologist, part treasure-hunter—rediscovered the remains, overrun with jungly vegetation, in the nineteenth century, and began a process of preservation and restorations. In 1881 British officer H. H. Cole made the first effort at preserving Sanchi, clearing away the vegetation and also, unfortunately, hundreds of the lesser votive stupas that—in his view—had also overrun the site. Cole also set up two of the fallen gateways. From 1912 to 1919 John Marshall carried out sustained restoration work at Sanchi, often reassembling fallen structures and producing a comprehensive survey of the site.

Nowadays the Archaeological Survey of India maintains Sanchi as a protected site, and in 1989 UNESCO recognized it as a World Heritage Site. It is the most fully preserved of all early Buddhist sites in South Asia, and it is increasingly a center of tourism and modern international Buddhist pilgrimage. New structures have joined the site. The Chetiyagiri temple, constructed in 1952, houses the relics of the Buddha's eminent disciples Shariputra and Maudgalyayana, and it hosts an annual International Buddhist Festival to display those sacred remnants.[18] The Sanchi Archaeological Museum, originally established by Marshall and now greatly expanded, displays many of the loose sculptures found around the stupas. And Marshall's own commodious residence, constructed for him while he worked at Sanchi in the 1910s, has been restored as a house museum. For us, the remains of Sanchi, and especially its Great Stupa, offer a remarkable material embodiment of the religious culture of early Indian Buddhism.

The Emanating Stupa: Work and World

Making the Great Stupa at Sanchi was a long-term project. It required the collective work of Buddhist teachers, patrons both wealthy and not-so-wealthy, artisans, sculptors, and many others, laboring over several centuries, to create a Buddhist monument of mounting complexity and artistic sophistication. Following the basic pattern of Buddhist stupas, the Great Stupa began in Mauryan times with the depositing of Buddhist relics in a burial mound. During the Shunga period the stupa grew outward from this central core, as if the physical presence of the Buddha itself were emanating forth. Later builders added new elements, most prominently a stone enclosing wall with four tall decorated gateways. The fully formed stupa with all its additions became a Buddhist microcosm. It embodied a symbolic vision of the world according to Buddhism, and it also created a sacred zone where devout Buddhists could participate in that world.

With the Great Stupa we can trace the process of centrifugal construction. The initial stupa dates to the Mauryan period and the initiative of Ashoka. It was a solid brick hemisphere, about sixty feet in diameter. The relics and reliquary that would have once been the animating center of this original stupa have not been found; presumably they were looted before the British official Cunningham made his own effort to find and appropriate them. Atop the brick stupa was a carved sandstone parasol, pointing to the lordly status of the being contained within.

Next to the stupa, Ashoka had a pillar erected. The polished stone shaft, forty-two feet in height, supported a lion capital similar to the one at Sarnath. The Chunar sandstone of the pillar came from a quarry near Benares, some five hundred miles away from Vidisha. Transporting this forty-ton stone slab down the Ganges, Yamuna, and Betwa rivers and then up the Sanchi hill was itself a demonstration of Mauryan imperial engineering. In the fragmentary inscription carved on the pillar, also like the one at Sarnath, the emperor Ashoka warns against dissension in the Buddhist Sangha. But unlike Sarnath, Sanchi had no direct association with the life of the Buddha Shakyamuni, prior to the arrival of the relics. We do not know for certain why Ashoka chose this hill outside Vidisha for stupa and pillar, but there is a tradition, related in the *Mahavamsa*, that he had married the daughter of a banker in Vidisha, and that she persuaded him to sanctify Sanchi (MVa 13.8-11). In any case, this new sacred site outside Vidisha provided a forceful sign of the Buddhist order expanding southward beyond its Indo-Gangetic homeland.[19]

A century later, during Shunga times, the brick stupa began to grow. The mound was given a new and more permanent shell of dressed sandstone. The stone structure was covered with a layer of concrete and finished with a coat of fine lime-plaster, probably decorated with festoons. The plaster coating has long since eroded away. This doubled the diameter of the stupa to 120 feet, and it now reached a height of fifty-four feet. The practice of centrifugal expansion of early stupas—mirroring the emanating influence and resources of the Buddha and his followers—was a common architectural strategy. At Sarnath, the Dharmarajika stupa marking the place of the Buddha's first teaching was encased and expanded six times.[20] For Sanchi's expanded mound or "egg" (*anda*), builders added a terrace all the way around the stupa, providing a raised flat surface for devotees to circumambulate the central mound. They added a stone railing along the outer rim of the terrace, and stairs to allow access to the raised terrace. Atop the dome was another much smaller balustrade surrounding a new stone parasol.

Sacred sites are often set apart from the mundane world by borders, fences, or walls that limit access. The original Mauryan-period core of the Great Stupa probably featured a wooden fence surrounding it, but this would have been removed at the time of expansion. Shunga-period builders constructed a new and much larger outer stone balustrade, over ten feet in height. The stone masons followed wooden prototypes by using stone posts, crossbars, and copings. This outer fence was left undecorated, except for myriad inscriptions that record pious donations to the reconstruction. Between this outer barrier and the terrace—a width of about ten feet around the entire stupa—builders paved the surface with large stone slabs. This provided a more accessible outer path for circumambulation. Four openings in the cardinal directions were left as places of access to the inner precinct of the Buddhist stupa.

The modern visitor can see most of this Shunga Era structure intact. But the rather monochrome tones of the bare stone we see now are not what would have met the eyes of a Buddhist pilgrim during Shunga times. The plaster-covered stupa (as British archeologist John Marshall reimagined it) would have been "glaringly white, with the swags around it perhaps picked out in colours, while the balustrades, and, later on, the gateways, were red."[21] The umbrellas atop the dome may have been red or gilded. Rising from the top of a hill above the river plains, the Great Stupa would have dazzled the viewer, as if the whole were illuminated from within by the reliquary presence of the Buddha Shakyamuni.

A century or so later, in the first century CE, artisans added remarkable stone gateways (*torana*) for each of the four entrances. Each gateway stands some eighteen feet high. For each gateway, two square pillars with capitals support a superstructure of three architraves (**Fig. 17**). They are replete with sculpture. Against the massive simplicity of the egg-shaped stupa containing the remains of the deceased Buddha, the richly embellished gateways present a vivid and lively representation of the surrounding Buddhist world.

Bas-relief sculptural panels swarm up and down the pillars inside and out, and spread across the architraves. Some depict events from the lifetime of the Buddha Shakyamuni. Others relate scenes from the Buddha's previous lives, which he remembered and recounted as *Jatakas* (birth-stories). We see portrayals of the division of the Buddha's remains after his cremation, Ashoka's visits to Buddhist sacred places, and other important events in the history of the Buddhist religious community. We see veneration directed toward the Bodhi tree and toward stupas. Lions, elephants, horses, and other animals, both realistic and fantastical, crowd the gateways. Lotuses and floral designs wind up the columns and across the crossbeams. And on top of the upper architraves, at the symbolic summit of the gateways, stand key symbols of Buddhist religious culture: the Wheel of Law and the Three Jewels of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.

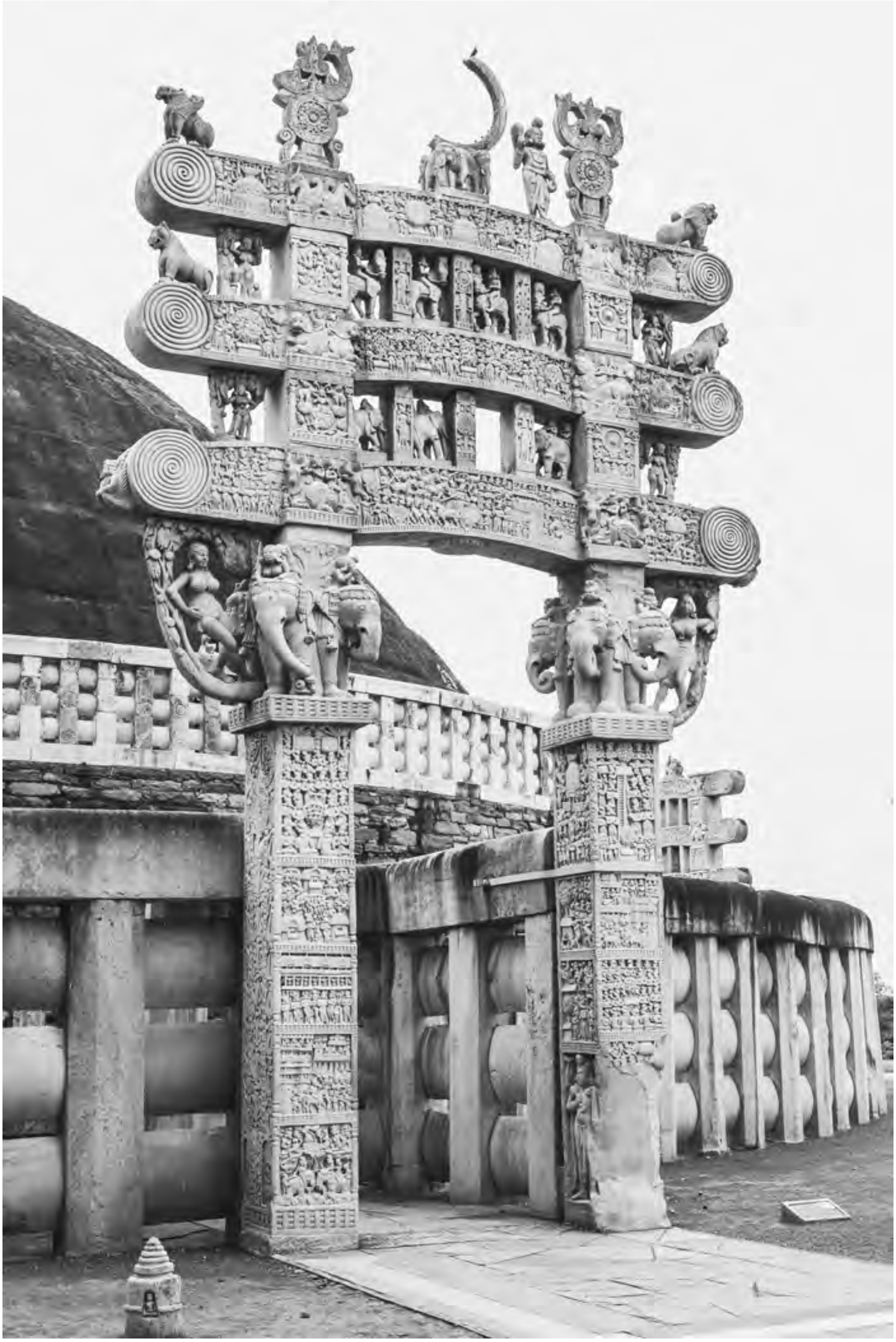


FIGURE 17. Sanchi Stupa 1, Gateway and Stupa, 1st century CE. Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh.

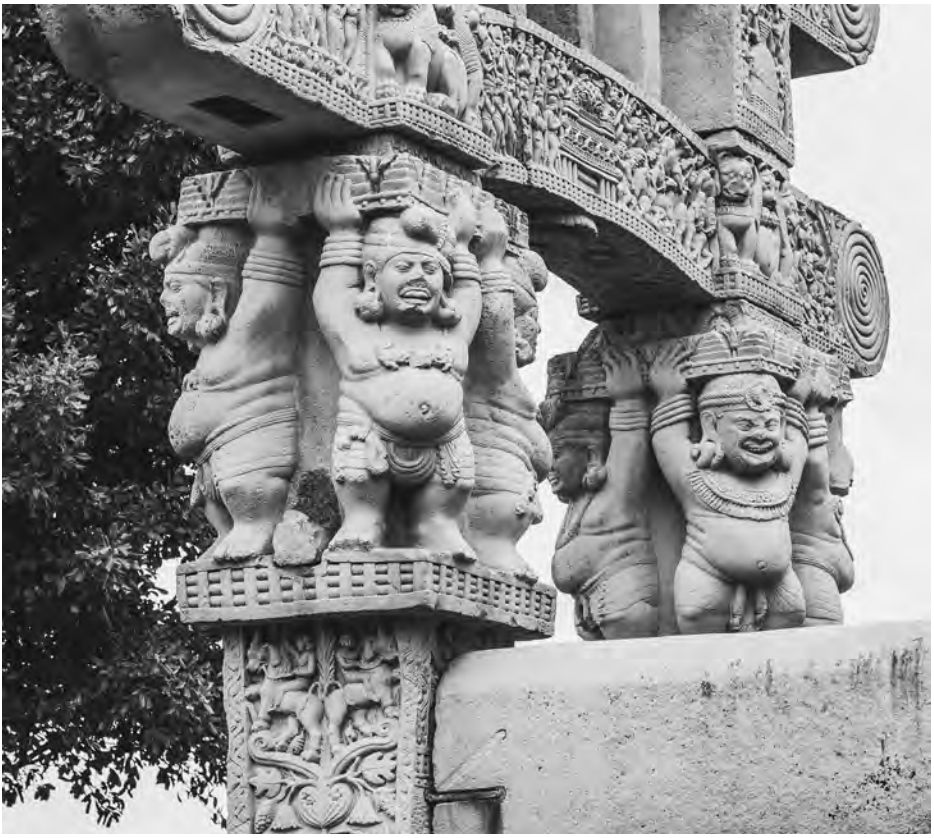


FIGURE 18. Dwarf Yakshas on Sanchi Gateway. 1st century CE. Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh.

The earthly deities are also part of this world. Powerful squatting Yakshas stand atop the capitals of pillars, holding up the beams, while robust Yakshis spring out from the posts as if to support the architrave projections (**Fig. 18**). On the inner faces of the uprights in each gateway, sculpted male Yakshas guard the thresholds. These door-guardians are not menacing or restrictive, but calm and welcoming. To walk through the teeming Buddhist world represented in stone on these looming gateways, past the encouraging guards, into the gleaming inner stupa precinct marks a striking passage into a sacred space.

The Great Stupa consecrated Sanchi hill as a Buddhist holy site and attracted both people and structures like a magnet. A proliferation of stupas of every size came to crowd the hilltop. A majority of the lesser ones—modest votive

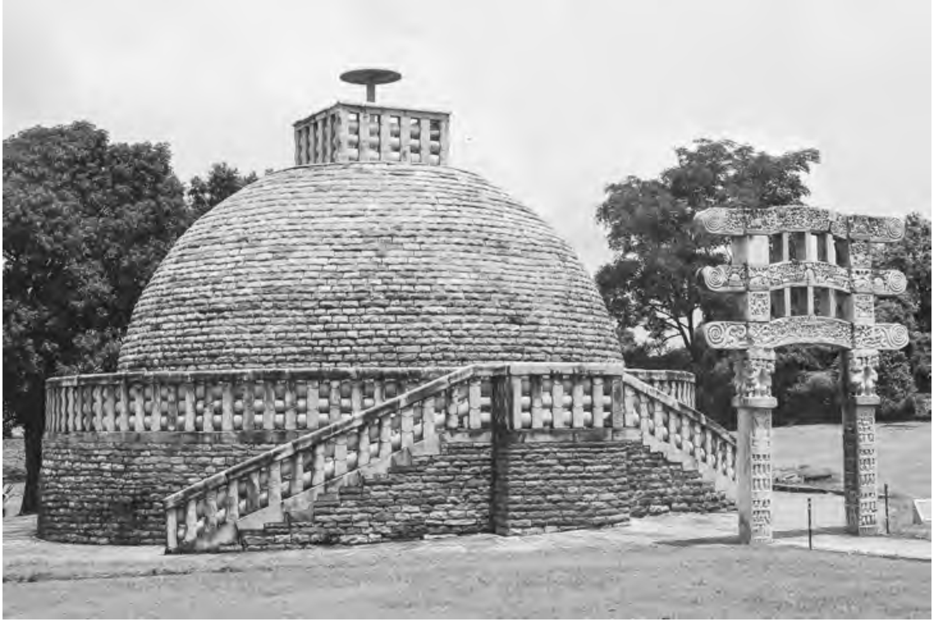


FIGURE 19. Sanchi Stupa 3, Gateway and Stupa. Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh. 1st century BCE–1st century CE.

stupas—were swept away during the 1881–83 British cleanup of the area. During Shunga times, as the Great Stupa expanded, several noteworthy stupas were added, enlivened by other relics. Close to the main stupa, some fifty yards to the northeast, stands Stupa 3. It is half the height of the Great Stupa and has one gateway rather than four. This stupa originally contained the relics of Shariputra and Maudgalyayana, the two foremost disciples of the Buddha. Thus their burial stupa sits attentively beside that of their master, just as they sat beside him in life (**Fig. 19**).

A short walk down the hill to the west is Stupa 2. This stupa, with charming Shunga-period carvings on its balustrade, housed the relics of a number of Buddhist teachers belonging to the Hemavata order. The Hemavata was one of many early schools of Buddhism, and it was closely linked with the conservative Theravada order. The most prominent of these teachers was named Gotiputa, called the "Light of Sanchi." It seems likely, as Michael Willis argues, that Gotiputa came south to the Vidisha area from a Buddhist center along the Ganges, sometime in the second century BCE, and brought with him a portion of the relics of Shariputra and Maudgalyayana.[22] This Hemavata teacher and his followers played a key role in reinvigorating the Buddhist site of Sanchi, as well as other Vidisha-area centers, during the Shunga Era. They directed the expansion of the existing Mauryan period stupas at Sanchi and Satdhara, and they initiated new Buddhist sites at Sonari, Bhojpur, and Andher. Through their impetus, new stupas were built at Sanchi and Satdhara to house the relics of Shariputra and Maudgalyayana. Later, Gotiputa's followers also directed the construction of stupas for the remains of Gotiputa and other Hemavata teachers. Over several generations this close-knit group of Buddhist monks evidently coordinated the effort to realize Sanchi and its satellite centers as a whole Buddhist world, on the hills outside the Shunga capital.

In earlier scholarship on the history of Buddhism it was common to distinguish a monastic religious culture from a lay-oriented one. In this division, "elite" monks and nuns engaged in a philosophical and meditative quest for Nirvana, while Buddhist lay followers involved themselves in a host of "popular" practices such as the worship of stupas. As Gregory Schopen has argued (drawing on the work of classicist Peter Brown), this "two-tiered" model is disproven by substantial archeological evidence.[23] It is clear that the construction and enlivening of a sacred center like Sanchi involved monks and nuns as well as the laity and other supporters of the order. We can see this in the abundant evidence of inscriptions.

Patronage Etched in Stone

A project like the Great Stupa and the surrounding Buddhist complex on Sanchi hill required the mobilization of religious direction and sculptural skill toward a single expanding work over a considerable amount of time. It also required significant economic resources to support the work. We are fortunate that many of the patrons who contributed materially to this project chose to have their names and identities as patrons etched into the stone fabric of the monument. Over eight hundred inscriptions at Sanchi, most quite brief, still remain as a permanent record of their pious acts of generosity, two thousand years later.[24]

An act of patronage involves an exchange. A donor provides some resources, such as food, money, in-kind donations, or labor, to a worthy recipient. In Buddhist culture, lay supporters are called upon to supply the basic material needs of the Buddha and his followers, who assume the role of mendicants when they join the Sangha. But donors get something in return. They receive the inward value of merit and perhaps also the valuable ethical teachings a monk or nun can provide. Buddhist renouncers, the texts repeatedly affirm, are "fields of merit," good places for householders to sow their seeds of generosity.

At Sanchi and the other Buddhist sites around Vidisha, donors were asked to go beyond this basic support of livelihood for the local monastic communities. Their tangible resources would also go to the Sangha engaged in its massive stupa-construction project. Not just monks and nuns, but stonecutters, transport workers (and their animal teams), builders, sculptors, masons, plasterers, and engravers, as well as many other ancillary workers, were required for the tasks at hand. Donors would accrue the inward merit of supporting this worthy endeavor, namely, the commemoration of the physical remains of the Buddha Shakyamuni and some of his more notable disciples. But donors might gain outward benefits as well: status, prestige, legitimation, what we might call "social capital." Those donors who chose to have their names and identities etched onto the monument proclaimed their generosity for others to see.

The inscriptions at Sanchi are, with rare exceptions, very simple in form. They follow the terse formula: "the gift of [name]." These texts are a bit like the brass name-plaques of individual contributors one might see on the backs of seats in a college auditorium. We can know these donors from two millennia ago by name: "the gift of the nun Achala from Nandinagara," "the gift of Sonadeva, wife of Sikarakhita," "the gift of the householder Patithiya from Tumbavana," and hundreds more. In addition to the donor's name, many provide additional identifying information, such as the donor's occupation, kin relations, or place of residence. Most donations are by individuals, but some gifts also come from corporate groups like artisan guilds or village councils. Only in a few rare cases do inscriptions specify what was given, like a particular pillar or architrave. None say anything about why the donor gave. Motivation is left unstated, perhaps too obvious to require explanation. Despite their brevity, the large quantity of inscriptions does allow us to reconstruct the religious community of donors who supported the construction, expansion, and maintenance of the stupa complex at Sanchi. In significant ways the epigraphical evidence challenges the assumptions about social categories conveyed in normative disciplinary works of the period, both the Veda-based Dharmasutras and the Buddhist monastic codes.

For the initial phase in the life of the Great Stupa, royal initiative appears decisive in the inscription on Ashoka's pillar. Ashoka presents himself as a kind of unitary executive, supporting and enlarging the Buddhist Sangha through his redivision and broad redistribution of the Buddha's relics. The project at Sanchi forms part of this expansive imperial program. But subsequent rulers in Vidisha during the Shunga or later dynasties do not appear in the epigraphical record. Among the eight hundred inscriptions, only three individuals have an explicit connection with a royal court: a royal scribe, a foreman of the king's artisans, and a queen of an unspecified ruler. While the rulers and courtiers in the capital surely tolerated the Buddhist activities on nearby Sanchi hill, and most likely participated in some way, they did not choose to memorialize their support in permanent form.

Instead of centralized royal direction, the inscriptions point to broad-based patronage for the project by individuals and groups from many walks of life. The most frequent occupational identifications are landed householder, banker, and merchant. Others include artisan, ivory worker, mason, cloak seller, weaver, garland maker, and potter. This reflects a largely urban base of support, with strength among commercial and professional artisan groups. A few donations from locations well beyond the Vidisha area—such as Ujjayini, Pushkar in Rajasthan, and Pratisthana in Maharashtra—point to networks of trade that linked Sanchi to an extended Indic merchant world. None of the donors use the categories of Vedic social classification, the four *varnas*, in these inscriptions. Of course, this does not mean that Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, or Shudras did not make contributions. But evidently patrons did not consider these supposedly universal terms to be a relevant aspect of their identities in this Buddhist setting.

It is striking that a large proportion of donors at Sanchi are female. By one count, donations by men number 380, while those of women amount to 344. This strong female presence in patronage of the stupa parallels the visibility of female devotees in the sculpture on the monument. Relief panels depict women as active and fervent participants in the Buddhist world. Some women eagerly watch the passing parades from their balconies or rooftops, while others attend Buddhist shrines, honoring them with folded hands or bringing baskets of offerings. The inscriptions show that women also had access to substantial economic resources and that they participated in the Sanchi project as self-standing patrons. Complete female economic dependence, as set out in the Smarta Brahmin works on dharma, was emphatically not the case in this community of Buddhist lay supporters. As Upinder Singh notes, the scale of female participation in this stupa project also goes well beyond what the early Buddhist texts of the Pali canon would lead one to expect.[25]

Nor were all the patrons lay followers. A large number of donors identify themselves as monks or nuns (252, or nearly 30 percent of the total). Roughly equal numbers of male and female monastics appear. Presumably these mendicant donors resided at Sanchi or at nearby Vidisha Buddhist centers. Some of them identify themselves with epithets or descriptors that point to the division of religious labor within the monastic community. These roles include: reciter, dharma teacher, disciplinarian, ascetic, Sutra expert, one who knows the Five

Nikayas, and saint. Several novice monks and nuns identify themselves as pupils of specific teachers.

The proliferation of contributions by monks and nuns, however, poses a question. Upon joining the Buddhist order, according to the monastic codes, new monks and nuns were required to abandon their worldly wealth and adopt a frugal renunciatory lifestyle. Vinaya rules prohibit the receiving and handling of gold and silver, as well as the buying and selling of property. Further, as we have seen, in his final days the Buddha Shakyamuni proposed a division of religious labor within the larger Buddhist Sangha. As recorded in the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, his monastic followers should devote themselves to the Dharma, as embodied in his teachings. He left the commemoration of his cremated remains, ensconced in burial mounds, as an activity for lay followers. Yet here at Sanchi, in the inscriptional evidence, we see monks and nuns retain access to significant economic resources and direct it toward the project of constructing stupas. Clearly, things on the ground at Buddhist sacred sites like Sanchi did not always follow what the Buddhist texts prescribed. Buddhist monks and nuns not only involved themselves in promoting these projects; they also possessed the means to put their money where their Dharma-reciting mouths were.[26]

Veneration at the Stupa

From the time of Ashoka, through the two centuries of the Shunga Era, burial mounds animated by the relics of the Buddha Shakyamuni and eminent Buddhist teachers—stupas—became active, lively centers of Buddhist religious practice involving monastics and lay followers. Sanchi is just one particularly well-preserved site among many that were established during this period. Up and down the Indo-Gangetic plains from Taxila to Bengal, including the locations most associated with the Buddha's own lifetime like Bodh Gaya and Sarnath, Buddhist stupas became prominent throughout the northern Indian landscape. New centers also sprang up farther south, beyond the Vidisha area, in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Sri Lanka, mapping the pan-Indian reach of Buddhist religious culture. A broad community of patrons directed economic resources toward the construction and decoration of stupas. Buddhist religious specialists like the Hemavata monks around Vidisha involved themselves directly in the stupa projects, and artisans developed increasing skill in their sculptural embellishments.

But what should people do at stupas? What were the ritual practices surrounding these growing centers? Why did they honor them? In the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, unfortunately, the Buddha does not explain this to Ananda.

He recommends that his remains be commemorated in a burial mound, but he offers no further guidance concerning the treatment of the mound. Nor do the *Vinaya* texts of the Theravada Buddhists provide directives. While the disciplinary code sets out highly specific guidelines for the conduct of monks and nuns, it seems to omit stupa-related practices as outside its purview. Fortunately, the artists who covered the stupa gateways at Sanchi with relief sculpture left us a visual description of the venerative activities to be done inside the gates.

Prior to the first century CE, Buddhist stone sculpture was "aniconic." That is, sculptors did not depict the Buddha Shakyamuni in anthropomorphic form. Rather, artists represented his presence through objects closely associated with him, such as his footprints, the Bodhi tree under which he sat at his moment of enlightenment, the wheel of Dharma he set in motion with his first sermon, and the commemorative stupa housing his corporeal remains. Visual images of stupas appear in great abundance on the gateways of Sanchi, as they do in the sculptural art at other early Buddhist stupas. And these images illustrate how stupas were to be seen and venerated.

In the reliefs, stupas exert a magnetic attraction on everything around them. They form the vital center of each composition, pulling toward them all sorts of beings. Males and females, rulers and their retinues, monks and nuns are all drawn to the stupa, as are elephants and other animals, Nagas and Naginis, and winged flying creatures. Humans come to honor the stupa through bodily gestures. They fold their hands in reverence, or hold hands above their heads, or kneel at the base of the stupa in supplication. They walk around it in ritual circumambulation. They make offerings as well, most often flowers and flower garlands. Elephants bear garlands in their trunks, and celestial beings drop them from the air. These simple acts of spontaneous reverence treat the stupa, animated within by the presence of the deceased Buddha's remains, as a superior person worthy of veneration, much as humans and other beings honored the living Buddha Shakyamuni during his lifetime.

The most detailed of these stupa compositions at Sanchi appears on a supporting pillar of the northern gateway (**Fig. 20**). Some scholars identify this as the "parinirvana festival" held by the Mallas at Kushinagara, site of the Buddha's corporeal death, but it can serve as a model for any festive occasion revolving around a stupa. Perhaps it depicts a festival held at Sanchi itself. The center of the composition is the stupa itself, with its characteristic egg-shaped mound, topped by a square railing and three umbrellas festooned with hanging banners and flower garlands. Encircling the mound midway is a belt of decorative swag. The relief shows three balustrades around the central stupa, and the outermost

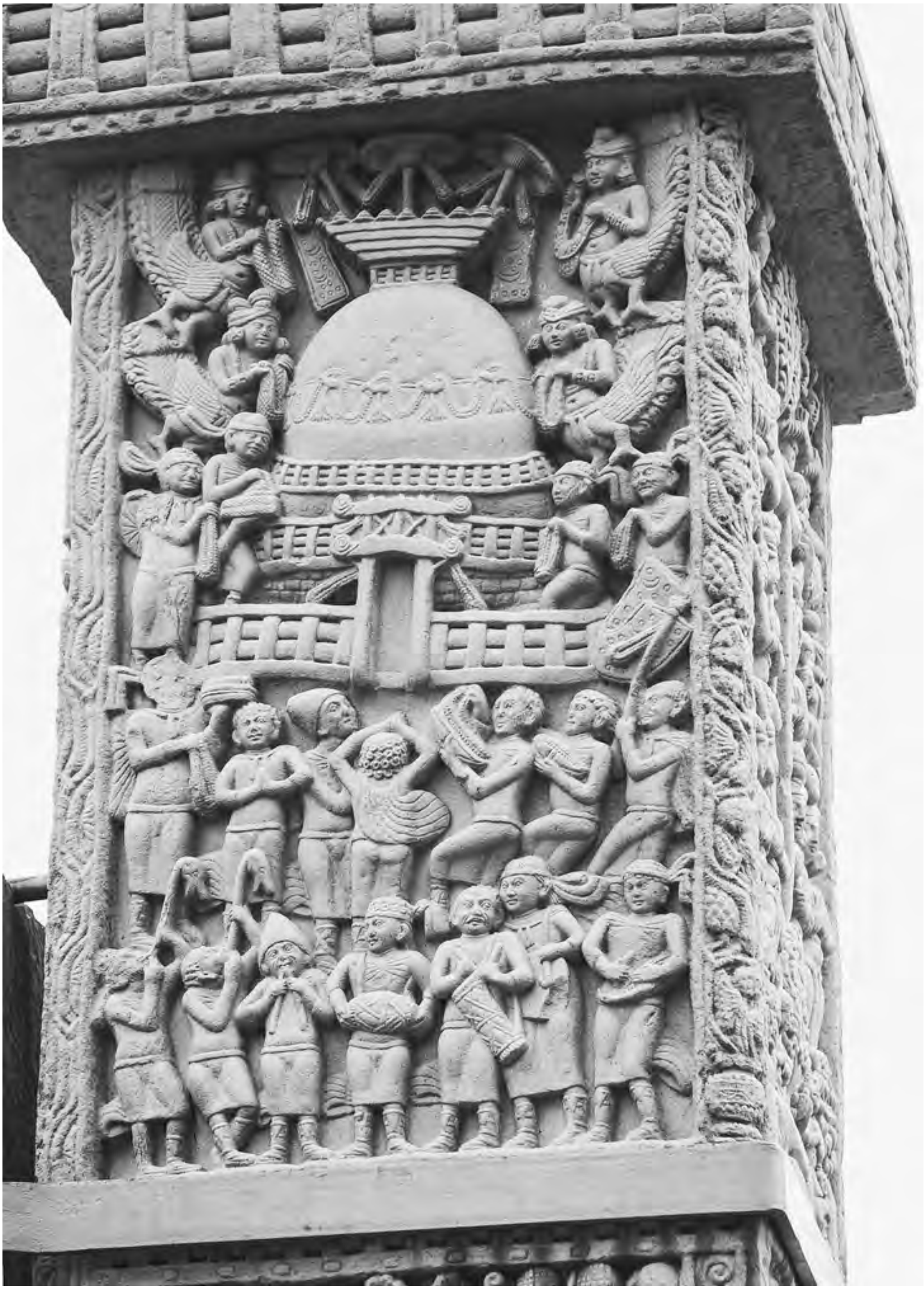


FIGURE 20. Stupa Veneration, relief panel on north gateway, Sanchi Stupa 1, 1st century CE. Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh.

fence features a gateway shaped much like the gateway on which the relief appears. Inside the fence, men with flower garlands in their hands are circumambulating. Outside the fence, in a lower register of the sculpture, we see more men—some honoring the stupa with folded hands, one marching as he holds aloft a banner, and several others carrying baskets filled with offerings. At the bottom of the composition, a troupe of musicians accompanies the festivities. In this ensemble, several beat drums, one blows on a two-reeded flute, and two play on long goose-necked horns. Finally, on both sides above, winged beings fly toward the stupa with more flower garlands ready to adorn the mound.

Reliefs like this are, in Catherine Becker's apt phrase, "meta-stupas": sculpted images that decorate stupas that are themselves about stupas. "These depictions of stupas allow us to understand more precisely the stupa and its decorative program as a vehicle for the power of the relics," she writes, "whereby the visual and somatic engagement with the stupa and its adornments gives rise to numerous joyous acts of generosity that propel the devotee along a path towards further spiritual attainment."[27]

We can gain a fuller sense of the religious ethos surrounding stupa veneration from later Buddhist stories compiled during the Kushana period in the *Divyavadana*.[28] In these narratives, stupas appear as "agents of faith" (*prasadika*), much as the Buddha Shakyamuni and eminent Buddhist teachers are. That is, the sight of these figures brings about "faith" (*prasada*), a state of mind conducive to acting generously, in a person who encounters them. There is a recurring pattern in the stories. A person comes into visual contact with an agent of faith. This encounter inspires in the person a powerful desire to perform an act of generosity, such as making a donation to the Sangha or to a stupa. The gift in turn produces beneficial merit, good karma, that will inevitably come to fruition, often in a future lifetime. The omniscient narrator Buddha appears at the end of each story to predict or explain the happy outcome of the meritorious action. In his analysis of the *Divyavadana*, Andy Rotman summarizes this common narrative sequence:

Seeing → *prasada* → giving → prediction.[29]

The story of Kotikarna provides a brief illustration of the pattern. When Maha Kashyapa, one of the Buddha's principal disciples, dies, the king of Varanasi constructs a stupa for his remains and assigns a portion of taxes for its maintenance. But when the king's son succeeds him, the new ruler withdraws support and the stupa begins to deteriorate. A traveling merchant from the northern regions happens to pass by and sees the dilapidated stupa. He asks its caretakers, an older couple, how this has come to be. To fund its repairs, he gives them a valuable jeweled earring, and with it the caretakers are able to restore Kashyapa's stupa. Later, after he has sold his merchandise, the merchant returns and sees the restored stupa, a "sight one never tires of seeing." He is immediately filled with faith. The faith-inspiring sight of the stupa leads him to make a further donation, to sponsor a great ceremony of worship, and to make a fervent aspiration. He seeks to be born in a wealthy family where he will be able to live a life of virtue.

In the *Divyavadana*, the Buddha Shakyamuni tells this story to his audience of monks, which includes Kotikarna. Thanks to the merit of his act of donation, the Buddha explains, the merchant has come to be reborn as Kotikarna (whose name means "one with an ear worth ten million"). Born in the affluent family of Balasena, Kotikarna has lived a life of privilege and adventure. After his parents' death, Kotikarna has joined the Buddhist order as a monk, attained the status of arhat, and come to see the Buddha Shakyamuni, who relates to him the story of his past life.

As with the worship of earthly deities, the venerative practices toward Buddhist stupas involve seeing and honoring material embodiments—images or stupas—of beings considered to be superior. They are open to all. There are no restrictions on participation as to gender or class. One need not be twice-born or initiated, nor does one need to be a renouncer, though monks and nuns evidently do take part. There is a shared grammar of bodily actions and material offerings, reflected in both sculpture and story. As with the worship of Yakshas and Yakshis, the rewards of supporting or venerating a stupa are matters of a worldly good life, not spiritual transcendence, as we see in the merchant's aspiration to be reborn in a prosperous family. So, is stupa veneration also a form of the ritual practice of devotion, or Bhakti?

The sight of the Buddha or of a stupa, in the stories of the *Divyavadana*, may inspire an overwhelming desire to make a virtuous donation. The result of that gift may bring to the donor great benefits. But the Buddhist storyteller makes an important distinction. In the non-theistic Buddhist world, the agency of the good outcome is not the intervention of a deity. Rather, the workings of moral causality, the force of karman, cause the result. When the pious merchant donor to Kashyapa's stupa is reborn as Kotikarna in the affluent family of Balasena, it is his inner merit that brings this about, not any supernatural action taken by Kashyapa or the stupa.

We cannot be sure what everyday lay worshippers at Sanchi believed. But we can reimagine what the Buddhist teachers wanted them to think. For this, the stories of the *Divyavadana* offer clear instruction. Early in their marriage, goes the opening of the story of Kotikarna, Balasena and his wife become despondent because they have not produced a male offspring. The husband appeals to every deity he can think of. Balasena prays to Shiva, Varuna, Kubera, Indra, Brahman, and others, to the deity in the grove, to the forest deity, to the mountain deity, and to the deity who receives propitiations. This motley crew of divinities includes both vaidika gods (Varuna, Indra, Brahma) as well as clearly laukika gods, the ones identified not by name here but by their superintendence over specific earthly locations, such as the grove, forest, or mountain. And the prayers seem to succeed. Balasena's wife does indeed become pregnant and gives birth to the child they name Kotikarna. The narrator insists, however, that this was not the outcome of any divine intervention due to Balasena's prayers. "There is a popular belief that sons, and daughters too, are born as the result of prayers. But this is not so." Instead, the narrator continues, there are three conditions that lead to the birth of children: the sexual intercourse of father and mother, the health and fertility of the mother, and the presence of a being seeking rebirth. This is the Buddhist explanation of Kotikarna's birth.

Nevertheless, the storyteller observes, Balasena continued his practice of praying to the gods. As the Buddhist narrative recognizes, the gods do not cease to exist. Even virtuous people may continue to solicit their aid, based on popular belief. The problem the Buddhists faced was what to do about those gods. The route chosen in the Kotikarna story is to deny their agency, their power to intervene in human affairs, and to subordinate them to a more compelling Buddhist understanding of things. So, too, Sanchi stupa acknowledges, includes, and subordinates the earthly deities within its Buddhist stone imaginary.

Shramana Sages and Earthly Deities

All around Sanchi stupa one encounters Yakshas and Yakshis, Nagas and Naginis, and other laukika deities. They join in worshipping the symbols of the Buddha's presence. Benign Yakshas stand as sentries at the bases of the gateways, and stout dwarf Yakshas hold up the upper architraves. They have become an ineradicable part of the Buddhist world portrayed in the complex sculptural program of the site. But this has not happened without conflict, at least as far as the early Buddhists see things. Yakshas pose a challenge to the Buddha Shakyamuni and his early followers.[30]

In early Buddhist accounts, Yakshas are already there, ensconced in the north Indian landscape, secure in their shrines. Shramanas like the Buddha arrive as squatters, taking up temporary uninvited residence. The Buddhist narratives depict the Yakshas as responding aggressively to this encroachment on their territories. In Gaya, relates the *Suchiloma Sutra* of the *Sutta Nipata*, the Buddha comes and sits on the stone-couch (the altar) of the Yaksha Suchiloma's residence. Responding to the Buddha's trespassing, Suchiloma first tries unsuccessfully to push him away, and then he issues a threat. He will ask the Buddha a question. If the Buddha fails to answer, he says, "I will drive you out of your mind, or rip out your heart, or pick you up by your feet and throw you across the Ganges" (SN 2.5). The Buddha accepts the challenge. Suchiloma then poses his questions: What are the sources of passion and anger, of aversion and attraction, fear and mental perturbation? This is exactly the kind of query at which the Buddha excels. But it is also apt for Suchiloma. Yakshas, in Buddhist accounts, are passionate beings, quick to anger, prone to retaliation and violence. They may be troubled by their own hot tempers. The teachings of the Buddha, as the Buddhist texts view things, are ideally suited to cool the heated nature of these emotional, unpredictable, and powerful earthly deities. Yakshas can be converted, persuaded by the convincing answers of the Buddha and also by his calm steady bearing.

When the Buddha moves into the dwelling of Alavaka, the Yaksha angrily orders him to get out. Quickly changing his mind, Alavaka invites him back in, then again orders him out. After several of the Yaksha's dizzying mental vacillations, the Buddha finally refuses to comply. Alavaka threatens to throw the Buddha across the river, just as Suchiloma does, and poses the question he desperately wishes to have answered: What is the best way to live? The Shramana sage and the laukika deity engage in a colloquy. The Buddha answers all the Yaksha's questions, and in the end Alavaka pronounces himself convinced. "Why should I ask other Shramanas or Brahmins, since now I understand what should be given to bring about the greatest benefit," he exclaims. "From now on, I will go from village to village and town to town, honoring the Buddha and the Dharma he has taught so well" (SN 1.10. 12). Yakshas cannot become monks, since the monastic order is restricted to those of human birth and they are not humans. But Alavaka can give up his shrine and his autonomy, overcome his indecision, and become a wandering lay promoter of the Sangha. Now he will redirect his power and passion to support and spread the Buddhist message.

There are good Yakshas and bad Yakshas, in the view of the Buddhist texts. It depends on whether or not they are "pleased" by the Buddha and his teachings. Suchiloma and Alavaka are examples of good, converted Yakshas, but others are not so easily accommodated. In the *Atanatiya Sutta*, the Buddha hosts a meeting on Vulture Peak with the rulers of the four quarters. The lord of the north, Vessavana, explains to the Buddha why most Yakshas resist his message.

> You, sir, teach the Dharma of abstaining from killing, the Dharma of abstaining from stealing, the Dharma of abstaining from committing wrongful

> sexual activity out of desire, the Dharma of abstaining from speaking falsely, and the Dharma of abstaining from drinking intoxicating liquor . . . To some Yakshas, these teachings are unpleasant and unwelcome. (DN 32.2)

These are core ethical precepts for lay Buddhists, and most Yakshas reject them. Further, the recalcitrant Yakshas pose a real threat to peripatetic monks who wander into remote forests looking for solitude. They may well find themselves entering into territories that Yakshas consider their own. Vessavana lists forty-one dangerous Yakshas by name who might seize monks, or possess them, or physically harm them. Therefore he teaches a series of protective phrases that renouncers can use to ward off the dangerous Yakshas.

According to Buddhist understanding, Yakshas are born as fierce, passionate beings due to their actions in past lives, and they have the capacity to change their ways in this lifetime. In the "Sutano Jataka," the Buddha relates one of his own past lives to illustrate this. The future Buddha is born as Sutana, a poor wage-laborer in Varanasi. At that time, the story goes, a flesh-eating Yaksha named Makhadeva lives in a banyan tree near the city, and he claims as food any being who comes within the tree's shadow. The king of Varanasi, out hunting, ventures too close, but to forestall his own death he offers to supply the Yaksha with a daily supply of humans to eat. First he empties out the prisons. Then he begins to draft the poor, and so Sutana's day comes. The young man takes a gold plateful of rice and carefully pushes it into the shade of the tree with the tip of a sword. The Yaksha invites Sutana to come closer, but Sutana refuses and offers instead a regular vegetarian meal of rice. Soon, he tells the Yaksha, no other humans will be willing to come near the tree for fear of death. The Yaksha thinks this over and decides that a new arrangement makes good sense. Sutana lectures the Yaksha: "My friend, in a previous life you did some bad things. You were rough and cruel and you ate the flesh and blood of other creatures. Therefore you have been born as a Yaksha. From now on, do not take the lives of other creatures." He instructs him in the five virtues—the ethical foundations of the religious life—appropriate to a lay Buddhist follower. Finally, he invites the Yaksha to move to the city, where the best rice is available. The king of Varanasi establishes Makhadeva as a door-guardian at the city gate and makes sure that the Yaksha receives his regular share of excellent food.

While the more threatening Yakshas may need to be fended off by vulnerable monks and nuns on their wanderings, good Yakshas and Yakshis show up as full participants in the Buddhist world of the stupas. At Bharhut stupa, roughly contemporary with the expansion of the Great Stupa at Sanchi, the sculpted images of earthly deities are identified by inscription. The visitor to Bharhut would have met the Yakshis Chanda and Sudarhana, and Chakravaka the leader of the Nagas.

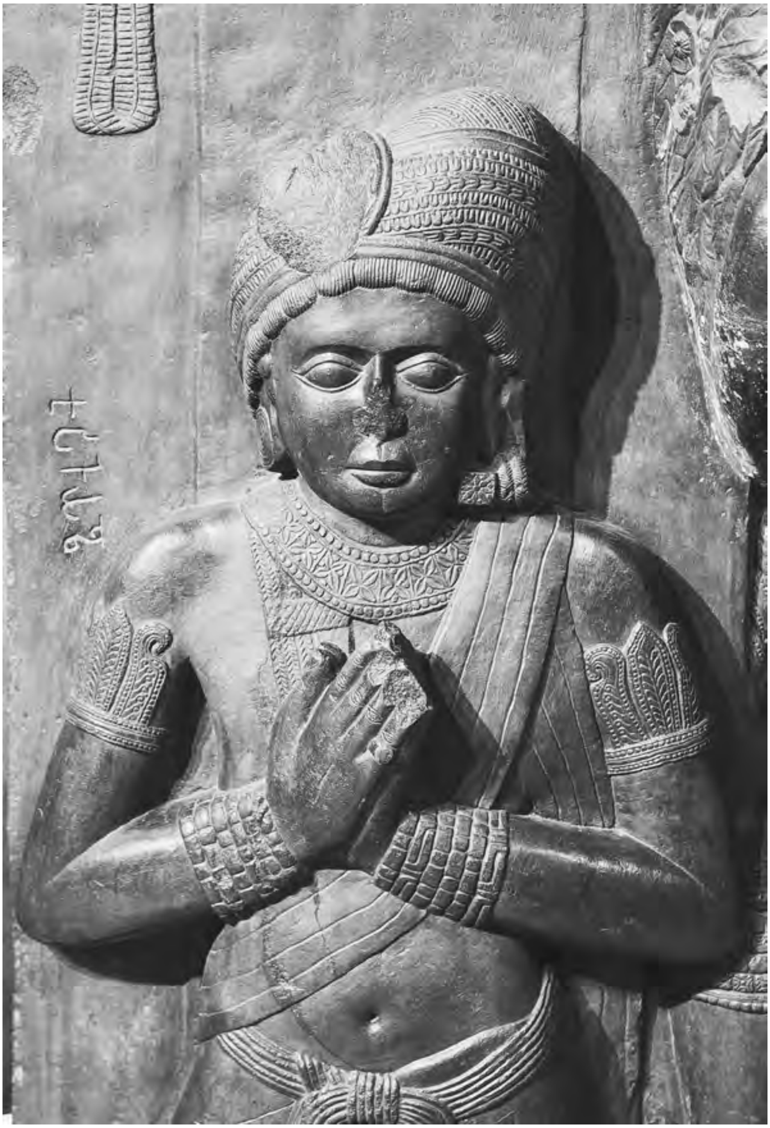


FIGURE 21. Kubera Yaksha, Bharhut, ca. 1st century BCE. Indian Museum, Kolkata.

Suchiloma, defeated by the Buddha in his own chaitya, now stands with hands folded in this Buddhist shrine. Even Kubera has taken his place here, on a corner pillar of the north gate (**Fig. 21**). But this is not the formidable autonomous Kubera one encounters at the Vidisha Museum. Here he has come to serve as an elegant, deferential door-guardian.

Heliodorus's Garuda Pillar and the Early Bhagavatas

In January 1873 the pioneering British archeologist Alexander Cunningham, visiting Vidisha during his tour of the Bundelkhand region (in modern-day Madhya Pradesh), came upon an intriguing freestanding pillar. The sandstone column stood about eighteen feet high, rising from a square platform. It had been carefully faceted and ornamented. At the top was a capital with an inverted, Persepolitan-type bell, similar to those on Ashokan pillars (**Plate 6**). A thick patina of red vermillion paste covered its lower portions. The local fishing community worshipped the pillar as a living deity, Khamba Baba (or "Lord Pillar"), and on special occasions they had rams sacrificed to appease the Baba. Cunningham had other ideas. He recognized the antiquity of the pillar and speculated that it might belong to the Gupta period of the early centuries CE. He also postulated that the pillar might well have an inscription, and so he proposed removing the vermillion residue of worship to find out. The local priest assured him there was no such writing underneath. No doubt the priest and the local devotees did not relish the prospect of a British officer taking a chisel to Khamba Baba. Cunningham accepted the priest's denial, and the Baba remained intact for the time being. Cunningham did, however, write up a careful account of the pillar and his encounter in his annual report.[31]

Thirty-two years after Cunningham's visit, two more British archeologists returned to the site and intervened more forcefully with Khamba Baba and its priest. Removing the vermillion crust, John Marshall and H. H. Lake uncovered a remarkable inscription on the base. The pillar turned out to be even older than Cunningham had supposed. Henceforth it would be known—to scholars if not to the locals—as the "Heliodorus pillar," after the patron who had it erected in the Shunga Era. And the pillar would open a historical window into the earliest stages of an important religious culture taking shape during this period. The British archeologists did not bother to record the reactions of the local worshippers of Khamba Baba, for whom it was still a living icon.[32]

Unlike Sanchi stupa, the pillar of Heliodorus formed part of the urban landscape of ancient Vidisha city. Ashoka's widespread use of freestanding inscribed columns established a powerful legacy in South Asia. From Mauryan times onward, elite patrons would often erect such visible markers rising from the landscape. A pillar could convey varied messages—territorial control, political victory, ideological conviction, pious donation—but it always pointed to the power of the one who erected it.[33] Heliodorus's eighteen-foot column certainly refers back to Ashokan precedents, with its inscribed base and its animal capital, but it is less than half the height of Ashoka's pillar standing on top of Sanchi hill outside of town. Its inscription, however, points ahead to the presence of a new religious culture. This is the earliest physical evidence of a new form of theism, identified as the "Bhagavata" order, that will take on clear form and great importance in the centuries after the Shungas. So, following the ambivalent example of the British officials Marshall and Lake, we will metaphorically chisel away at the pillar and see what it can tell us about Heliodorus and the earliest stage of Bhagavata theism.

The brief inscription on the side of the pillar base provides essential identifying information and also poses intriguing questions about its religious significance.

> Heliodorus, a Bhagavata, son of Dion, who has come as Greek ambassador representing the Maharaja Antialkidas to King Kasiputra Bhagabhadra, who is prospering in his fourteenth regnal year, here erected this Garuda-dhvaja of the God-of-gods Vasudeva.

On the other side of the column, the inscription conveys a pious sentiment, the kind of broadly applicable ethical aphorism one finds in the epic *Mahabharata* or the early Buddhist *Dhammapada*.

> Three steps followed carefully lead to heaven: self-control, generosity, and attentiveness.[34]

Like the patrons at Sanchi stupa, the pillar's sponsor Heliodorus first identifies himself, but he provides much fuller detail. By profession he is an ambassador or emissary representing the Indo-Greek (*yavana*) king Antialkidas, who ruled in the northwestern area around Taxila from roughly 115 to 80 BCE. The king, the ambassador, and the ambassador's father all have Greek names, not Indic ones. Heliodorus has come a great distance from Taxila to Vidisha, a thousand miles along the main trade routes of the time, to meet with King Bhagabhadra, usually considered to be the fifth Shunga king Bhadraka.

Heliodorus also identifies himself and the pillar in religious terms. He is a Bhagavata, he says, and the pillar is a *dhvaja* (banner, flagpole, or insignia) of Garuda, connected to the God-of-gods Vasudeva. The term *bhagavata* denotes one who is devoted to the *bhagavat*, or "lord." In earliest Vedic usage, bhagavat refers to someone who deserves a share or portion in the sacrifice. Significantly, it derives from the same verbal root as does bhakti. In post-Vedic times, bhagavat becomes an epithet for a fortunate, glorious, exalted being. One addresses a superior as bhagavat; it signifies a hierarchical relationship. Buddhist works refer to the Buddha Shakyamuni as bhagavat. In theistic contexts, bhagavat is a term for a god.

Bhagavatas like Heliodorus consider Vasudeva to be the Supreme Deity, a God over all other gods. But who is Vasudeva? This is not a Vedic divinity, and the emerging Bhagavata religion will depart in many respects from Vedic precedents. In later times the name Vasudeva will be particularly associated with Vishnu, a minor deity in the Vedas who rises to supremacy among all the gods, at least for the Bhagavatas, and with Krishna, a regional pastoral hero-god with no Vedic lineage who comes to be identified as an incarnation of Vishnu. Many scholars have assumed therefore that Heliodorus identified Krishna as the highest god. However, this is an anachronistic assumption. (We will meet up with Vishnu and Krishna again soon enough.) Among the earliest Bhagavatas, Vasudeva was a protean deity who took on many aspects and emanations. As V. S. Agrawala put it, the early Bhagavata order was a "syncretic cult uniting in its pantheon a wide variety of deities, godlings, and geni—Vedic as well as chthonic—and admitting them as different aspects of the One Supreme Being, Vasudeva."[35] It is wise, therefore, not to assume that ambassador Heliodorus had Vishnu or Krishna specifically in mind when he dedicated his pillar to Vasudeva.

What is clear, however, is that Garuda originally perched on top of the pillar, serving as an emissary of the new Supreme Deity.[36] In ancient India, *garudas* ("devourers") comprised a class of winged, semidivine creatures, similar in status to other laukika deities like Yakshas and Nagas. For the Bhagavatas, however, there is only one Garuda, the lord of all birds and a votary of Vasudeva. The first book of the *Mahabharata* relates the story of this fabulous Garuda and how he eventually became the ally of Vishnu (MBh 1.14-30).

The *Mahabharata* provides Garuda with a Vedic genealogy. He is offspring of one of two daughters of the Vedic creator god Prajapati, both of whom are married to the Vedic sage Kashyapa. (This is not the same Kashyapa as the disciple of the Buddha.) As is often the case in Indian story literature, the co-wives are at loggerheads. The first wife gives birth to a thousand snakes. The second wife gives birth to Garuda, and her child's special predilection is to feast on snakes. After many adventures, Garuda flies up into the heavens, where the laukika deity battles and defeats the gods led by their old Vedic chieftain Indra. Defeating Indra and the Vedic gods is a kind of narrative rite of passage for a rising new deity. Continuing on his aerial journey, Garuda encounters Vishnu in the sky. Rather than fighting one another, these two protean beings grant each other boons. Garuda requests that he always be above Vishnu. Vishnu in turn chooses Garuda to be his mount (*vahana*). Clearly they are jockeying for position. If Garuda is to serve as Vishnu's mount, how can he remain above the one riding him? Vishnu solves this dilemma by making a flagpole as a perch for Garuda. You shall stand above me, he tells Garuda, by being Vishnu's raised emblem. Vishnu wins the contest for status here.

Where there is Garuda on a raised standard, the story suggests, the god Vasudeva should be nearby. Archeologists have found evidence that Heliodorus's pillar was originally adjacent to a Bhagavata shrine, part of a larger sacred complex. Once, it appears, there were eight such pillars in a row, topped by differing capitals. All except the Garuda pillar have been displaced and only the pits that once supported them remain. Next to them was a raised plinth and the brick foundation for a shrine. The upper portions of the shrine, made of perishable wood, have long ago washed away in the periodic flooding of the Bes River. If there was an original Vasudeva image, it has also disappeared. It is not possible, therefore, to reconstruct Bhagavata practices of the Shunga Era from the minimal evidence of the excavated shrine foundations.[37]

Nevertheless, the Heliodorus pillar provides a fascinating but fragmentary glimpse into the earliest emergence during the Shunga Era of a new religious formation, the Bhagavata community devoted to Vasudeva. An elite member of an Indo-Greek court identified himself as a Bhagavata and participated through his patronage in the new religious group. The Bhagavatas were distinct from both the prevailing religious culture of the Vedic Brahmins and also from the renunciatory groups like the Buddhists occupying the hills outside of town. The Bhagavatas must have received at least tacit acceptance of the Shunga rulers; otherwise the foreign ambassador would certainly have avoided this public display of devotion in a Shunga capital city. The Bhagavatas recognized Vasudeva, a divine figure without Vedic pedigree, as the new God-of-gods. Heliodorus's pillar formed part of a larger shrine complex dedicated to Vasudeva, even though the character of the shrine is not clear. As a Garuda-dhvaja, the pillar clearly allies this laukika bird-deity with Vasudeva. As the story of Garuda in the *Mahabharata* story shows, the Bhagavatas incorporated Garuda into their religious pantheon in an important but subordinate role, as the mount or vehicle of the High God. Perhaps the well-traveled ambassador Heliodorus chose this particular bird insignia as an especially apt analogue for his own role.

Bhagavata theism would later coalesce around the primary figure of Vishnu Narayana, a new Supreme Deity, identified with Vasudeva. Among the characteristics of this new High God would be his ability to take on incarnations, such as the human heroes Krishna and Rama. The Bhagavatas would gradually develop a series of devotional practices that include the worship of Vishnu in image form. But the process of coalescence would take time. One can glimpse this development, and the sense of crisis that gave rise to it, most clearly in the great

Sanskrit epic poems *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. These works were themselves the result of gradual coalescence, much of which occurred during Shunga times. We will turn to the Sanskrit epics in the next chapter.

In modern-day Besnagar, the Heliodorus pillar stands under the protection of the Archaeological Survey of India. It also continues to receive the devotional attention of local residents, especially members of the Dhimar or fishing community, as Khamba Baba, a modern manifestation of a laukika deity. The Indian landscape is still filled with such earthly deities. When I visited the pillar in 2017, a group of teenage boys lounged nearby. One youth was kneeling with hands folded toward the pillar. As my archeologist guide started to step up onto the pillar platform without first removing his shoes, one of the boys immediately rushed up to caution him. Respect to Khamba Baba should still be paid.

A Yakshi in the Museum of Modern Art

In 2019 a Yakshi appeared at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, as part of an exhibition titled "Transfigurations." The imposing eight-foot-tall female form named "Yakshi" dominated the exhibition space (**Fig. 22**), With its powerful and voluptuous physique—full breasts, narrowed waist, and broad hips—it resembled its laukika sisters like the Besnagar Yakshi in the Kolkata Indian Museum. But unlike the stone Yakshis of Shunga times, this abstract Yakshi was composed of twisted hemp ropes dyed a deep navy blue, formed into an abstract faceless figure, and it was the work of a modern female Indian artist, Mrinalini Mukherjee. From one perspective, Mukherjee's rope sculpture fit well with the intention of the MOMA exhibition, "to suggest a dialogue between artists across nations and generations who have reimagined how women might be represented."[38] But from another point of view, it could appear as if one of the ancient earthly deities, still prevalent in the Indian landscape, had taken on a new incarnate form of twisted blue rope, to appear in this citadel of modernity.

Further uptown in New York, the same year, the Met Breuer had given over a full floor of its exhibition space to a lavish retrospective of Mukherjee's artistic career. There her "Yakshi" joined fifty-six other works. Mukherjee (1949–2015) trained as a cosmopolitan artist in postindependence India, at the Maharaja Sayajirao University in Baroda (now Vadodara), one of India's preeminent fine arts programs. But at Baroda, Mukherjee's mentor, K. G. Subramanyan, encouraged her to engage not just with the elite art-making traditions, but also with the "living traditions" of Indic arts and crafts. Mukherjee avidly explored the old craft practices of fiber wall-hangings. By the 1980s, her fiber compositions had begun

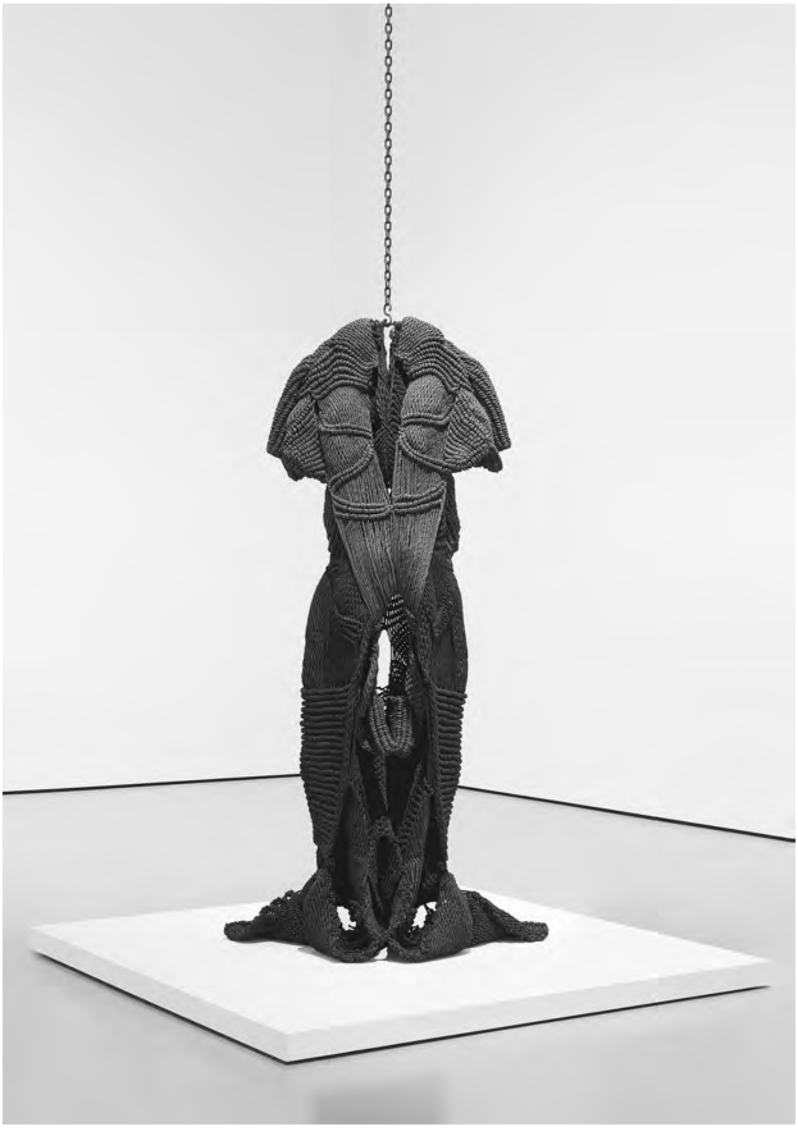


FIGURE 22. “Yakshi,” by Mrinalini Mukherjee, dyed hemp sculpture, 1984. Courtesy Mrinalini Mukherjee Foundation, New Delhi. Museum of Modern Art, New York (269.2017), Committee on Painting and Sculpture Funds, and acquired through the generosity of Mariene Hess and James D. Zinn and the Modern Women’s Fund. Photo copyright © the Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY.

to come off the walls, as it were, and stand up as independent sculptural beings. "Yakshi" of 1984 was one of these. The freestanding hemp sculptures were not representational, but Mukherjee gave them suggestive names: Van Raja (forest king), Prithvi (earth goddess), Nag Devta (snake deity), Devi, Sri, and Yogini, along with Yakshi. She tended to avoid the principal modern Hindu gods in favor of titles that evoked the world of earthly deities. Mukherjee explained that her aim was "to evoke the awe [you get] when you walk into a small sanctum of a temple and look up to be held by an iconic presence."[39] Evocative, then, but these rope beings were not to be construed as new icons for worship. The artist insisted that she was not a practicing Hindu and that her seeming deities "have no relationship to gods and goddesses in the traditional iconographic sense, but are parallel invocations in the realm of art."[40]

In his critical appreciation of Mukherjee's work, Naman Ahuja observes that her sculptures do not reference "the deities of everyday Hinduism," but instead echo an "older mythical substratum that was absorbed into all the ancient religions of India."[41] In this chapter we have looked at some of the dynamics of this process of absorption by the developing pan-Indian religious cultures. But that does not mean the laukika "substratum" ever disappeared. The popular, local, rural, little cultures of India—however we choose to name them—have exercised a continuing and fundamental force throughout the history of Indian religions. Mukherjee's artistic "invocations" of these point to the ongoing generative power the earthly deities have and still maintain, even in a world of cosmopolitan secular art-making and contemporary New York art institutions.

8

The Sanskrit Epics: Imagined Empires of the Hindus

"WHATEVER IS FOUND HERE, concerning the four aims of humans, may be found elsewhere," the narrator Vaishampayana tells King Janamejaya, as he begins to tell the story of the *Mahabharata*. "But what is not found here, is nowhere else" (MBh 1.56.33).

At the start of the *Ramayana*, the god Brahman makes a promise to the author Valmiki: "As long as the mountains stand and the rivers flow on this earth, so long will the story of Rama's deeds circulate among people. And as long as the story of Rama that you have composed circulates, so long will you live on in all my worlds, above and below" (Ram 1.2.35-36).

These two great Sanskrit literary compositions, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, ambitiously imagine they will encompass everything and live forever. They are remarkable literary achievements, masterful poems with a truly massive scope. The *Mahabharata* alone is 100,000 verses in length, some six times the length of the Christian Bible. Brahman's promise of longevity has proven to be prescient for both works. They have been carefully recited, transmitted, written down, recopied, edited, published, and translated over the centuries. The epics presented powerful arguments to audiences in their own time. And the stories they tell, the values they set forth, and the new gods who make their appearances in them have maintained a continuing presence and relevance for over two millennia.

By convention we call these compositions "epics." Although this is not how Indian tradition has classified them, the term fits well: "an extended narrative poem in elevated or dignified language celebrating the feats of a legendary or traditional hero."[1] Both Sanskrit epics center around the actions of heroic legendary figures who may have lived long ago, during the Vedic period. Like all epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* speak of the past in order to address the world at the time of their composition. They set forth values and models for their own present and for the future. Both epics concern themselves primarily with the exploits of the Kshatriya class, considered the warriors and proper rulers of Indian society, and they provide instructive lessons for kings through their stories. Like the "politicized" epic genre in the Western tradition, the two Sanskrit epics are tied to a monarchical system, to a national history, and to a vision of world domination.[2] They imagine new empires ruled by proper Kshatriya kings.

Scholars have long debated the precise dates of the epics' composition. They have questioned whether they were oral or written compositions, whether they were composed over a long period of time or relatively quickly, and whether they were put together by a single author or multiple authors. Although those debates continue, historians generally place the composition or consolidation of these works in the period after the Mauryan empire, in the two centuries we are designating the Shunga Era. The longer *Mahabharata* probably remained open to additions for several hundred years, before being fixed in authoritative final written form in the early centuries CE. That written epic circulated widely through India and beyond.[3]

They took shape in the shadow of the Mauryans. The rise of the Shramana orders of Buddhists and Jains, and Ashoka's model of a Buddhist-oriented empire, posed an existential threat to those groups who remained loyal to the older Vedic order. The loyalists did not remain passive. As historian U. N. Ghoshal describes it: "In the sphere of religion, Buddhism, thanks to the Imperial propaganda of Aśoka and the religious zeal of missionaries, not only entrenched itself in the Indian soil, but was well on its way to becoming a world-religion, while Jainism entered on its career of becoming an all-India cult. In the face of this challenge Brahmanism girt itself up by a tremendous intellectual effort for a new lease on life."[4] Ghoshal's dramatic formulation may overstate the degree to which "Brahmanism" acted as a cohesive cultural or religious formation. In post-Mauryan times there were many, varied responses. The most loyal Brahmins circled their wagons around the Vedas and developed sophisticated new methods of interpreting the ancient works in the Purva Mimamsa school. Others continued to nurture the gnosis-oriented explorations of the Upanishads, and these grew into the Vedanta schools of philosophy. Smarta Brahmins expanded their reflections on the domestic Dharma of Brahmins and began to develop a broader vision of a whole society organized around its principles. But the two Sanskrit epics took the most innovative and effective method for this girding up. The epic bards responded by composing lengthy narrative poems that conveyed a wide-ranging vision of a new social and political order, centered around new gods. They were multivocal enough to incorporate these other responses within their encompassing reach.

The *Mahabharata* calls itself a "fifth Veda." According to its own account, Vyasa taught the four Vedas and then taught the *Mahabharata* as the "fifth Veda" to his pupils, including Vaishampayana, the primary narrator of the epic. The *Mahabharata* certainly honors and draws upon the older Vedic legacy. This new fifth Veda is not like the other Vedas, however, and the new order the epic presents is not a replication or restoration of the Vedic past. This work and the *Ramayana* are more broadly accessible than the exclusive Vedas. They are meant to be heard by all strata of society, including Shudras and women, who had been explicitly prohibited from the Vedas. And they are more suited to the altered circumstances of post-Mauryan India. They recognize that the old patterns no longer suffice. The Vedic gods are no longer the uncontested sovereigns of the cosmos, and the sacrifice is not the only ritual game in town. The Kshatriya class of warriors has spun dangerously out of control with power and greed, and it needs to be educated in a new moral framework of Dharma.

In response to these challenges, the Veda-like epics articulate a new vision of an orderly society, an ethical monarchy, and a reinvigorated divine pantheon. They are meant to provide a "basis for living a good life in a good society in a good polity," as James Fitzgerald succinctly puts it.[5] The old Vedas still serve as a legitimating touchstone. The epics reaffirm the status of Brahmins as a privileged class of religious specialists, and they insist that Kshatriyas and Brahmins cooperate as elites in sustaining a hierarchical social order. They advance a fuller, more wide-ranging conception of this-worldly Dharma, while acknowledging and honoring the transcendent goals and yogic practices of sages and renouncers. The old principal Vedic gods like Indra and Agni stay around, now demoted as lesser divinities, while one of the minor gods of the Vedas, Vishnu Narayana, ascends to the status of Supreme Deity. This complex High God Vishnu can encompass other deities and can take on physical incarnations to intervene in earthly affairs, all the while remaining transcendent. In fact, Vishnu in human forms takes on starring roles in both epics. The epics, then, call into being a new religious culture: a synthesis of older Vedic elements and newer innovations, rethought by Brahmins and Kshatriyas in light of the Mauryan Buddhist challenge. For this we will use the term "Hindu." It is important to keep in mind that this term is not used in the epics, nor does it come into common usage until many centuries later.

Singers of Tales

For over two centuries, scholars have tried to reconstruct the composition of these two great Sanskrit epics, but questions remain. The epics themselves narrate the circumstances of their own composition and initial performance. While these framing narratives do not meet modern criteria of historical factuality, they do provide valuable ways to envision how the epics took shape historically.

The putative authors—Vyasa Krishna Dvaipayana of the *Mahabharata* and Valmiki of the *Ramayana*—both appear as characters in their own poems. Both authors observe austere renunciatory lifestyles. They both reside in ashrams, apart but not isolated from the events they recount. Valmiki appears as a simple offstage observer in his story of Rama, but Vyasa more fully participates in the actions of the *Mahabharata*. In rhetorical terms Vyasa is a "narrator-agent" in the story of the Bharatas; indeed, his procreative interventions prove necessary to the continuity of the Bharata lineage.[6] Both are portrayed, or portray themselves, as especially reliable narrators, gifted with extraordinary powers to see and describe the events they narrate. In their ashram homes they compile or compose their great epic poems, and they teach the compositions to their pupils. Vyasa conveys the *Mahabharata* to his own son and to four Brahmin pupils, including Vaishampayana. Valmiki transmits his epic story of Rama to Lava and Kusha, two young students of royal Kshatriya blood. In fact, they are the sons of Rama himself. These apprentices evidently learn their lessons well, and they are the ones who first perform the epic poems in public, for royal audiences at great Vedic sacrificial sessions.

At the very beginning of the *Ramayana*, the Brahmin ascetic Valmiki poses a question to the divine sage Narada, who is visiting his ashram. "Is there a man alive now in this world who is truly virtuous and brave, who knows Dharma and knows how to act, who speaks the truth and stays firm in his vows?" (Ram 1.1.2) Narada replies that, yes, indeed, there is one such man. His name is Rama, and he belongs to the Kshatriya lineage of the Ikshvakus. The sage goes on to give an effusive description of Rama's many sterling qualities, and he relates in brief the remarkable deeds performed by this hero. Rama is currently ruling in Ayodhya, Narada continues, where he is performing hundreds of Horse Sacrifices and bringing about a golden age.

> The people are happy and cheerful, well-fed and very righteous. They are healthy and free of disease, and they have no fear of famine. There men will never see the death of their sons. Women will not become widows, and they

> will always adhere to their vows to their husbands. There is no danger of winds, people do not get lost in floods, and there is no danger in fires—just as in the Golden Age (*Krita Yuga*). (Ram 1.1.71-73)

He will rule in this way for eleven thousand years, Narada foretells. In later times, Rama's rule, the *Rama-rajya*, will be remembered as the classical Indic version of utopia.

When Narada departs, Valmiki is left to ponder what he has heard. One day as he goes to bathe in the river, he observes with delight the lovemaking of a pair of sweet-singing krauncha birds. But as he watches, a Nishada huntsman shoots down the male bird. The female lets out a heartrending wail, and Valmiki is overcome with pity and compassion. He pronounces a curse on the Nishada: "You will not remain alive very long, Nishada, since you killed one of these krauncha birds when he was filled with passion" (Ram 1.2.14). Immediately Valmiki realizes that, out of his deep feeling of grief (*shoka*), his spontaneous curse has taken the form of a poem. It is pleasing in its meter, easy to recite, and well suited for musical accompaniment. He will call this poetic form the *shloka*. Later Indian tradition regarded this verse as the first example of a true poem, just as it considered Valmiki as the first poet (*kavi*) and the *Ramayana* as the first poetic composition (*kavya*).

Valmiki continues to be preoccupied with the senseless death of the krauncha bird, and when the god Brahman visits him at his ashram, Valmiki repeats his verse right in front of the god. Brahman gives Valmiki a task. He must use this new poetic form of the shloka to tell the story of Rama, as he has heard it from Narada. "In this poem nothing you say will be false," the god assures Valmiki, and then promises him poetic immortality. Valmiki is delighted, and he conceives the plan to compose a lengthy narrative poem, in shloka verses, to be called the *Ramayana*, the "deeds of Rama." Getting down to work, he sits on a cushion of darbha grass and enters into a profound meditation. This is his effective method of research. "Sitting there in his yogic meditation, the righteous Valmiki saw everything that had happened there previously, just as clearly as a myrobalam fruit held in the palm of his hand."[7] He even sees events that have not yet taken place and adds them to his story. When he has finished composing this full epic poem in his mind, Valmiki ponders who should perform it.

As it turns out, things are not quite perfect in Ayodhya. King Rama has learned that malicious rumors are circulating in the city. People have been questioning the faithfulness of his wife Sita. To preserve his reputation for scrupulous observation of royal Dharma, Rama decides he must abandon his beloved wife. It is not enough for a Dharma-king to be virtuous; he must be above suspicion. Rama orders his brother to abandon her in the forest. There, Valmiki's sons chance upon the forsaken Sita. They bring her to their father's ashram, and Valmiki takes her in as a ward. There Sita gives birth to twin sons, Lava and Kusha. They grow up as disciples of the sage.

Valmiki soon recognizes that these two royal-born boys possess sweet voices and excellent memories. The Brahmin treats them as brahmacharins and has them learn first the Veda and its exegesis. Then he teaches them his own composition, the *Ramayana*. They learn the entire poem for oral performance.

> It is sweet when it is recited and when it is sung in the three tempos—quick, moderate, and slow—using the seven notes of the scale, and accompanied by stringed lutes and drums. The two boys sang this poem filled with all the aesthetic moods: the comic, the erotic, the compassionate, the furious, the heroic, the fearsome, the disgusting, and still others. The two brothers, beautiful as celestial musicians, had lovely voices and knew all the foundations of music. They were skilled in pitch and melody. (Ram 1.4.7-9)

When Lava and Kusha are ready to take their performance on the road, Valmiki sends them out: "You two go together and sing this poem, this *Ramayana*, completely, with the utmost joy, at the auspicious camps of the sages, at the homes of Brahmins, on the chariot roads and the royal highways, and in the homes of the rulers" (Ram 7.84.3-4).

Rama is engaged at this time in the performance of a great Vedic Horse Sacrifice. When he hears that two young boys are traveling about, singing a beautiful poem about his own past adventures, he becomes curious and invites them to perform before an assembly during the sacrificial session. "During an interval in the sacrifice, King Rama, that tiger among men, invited the great sages, princes, scholars, townspeople, the storytellers, grammarians, the elderly, and twice-born Brahmins. When he had gathered them all together, he had the two singers brought in" (Ram 7.85.4-5). They begin singing the great poem composed by their teacher Valmiki, and all the audience is enchanted. Even Rama, the austere observer of Dharma, allows his mind to become enthralled by the story of his own adventures.

The first musical performance of the *Ramayana* lasts for many days. Rama eventually recognizes the two young singers as his own sons and asks that this exiled wife Sita be brought to him. But that is another story.

In the frame story of Valmiki's *Ramayana*, we see the early singers of the epic tales portrayed as another community of reciters. (The *Mahabharata* has a similar but more complicated framing story, with several levels of recitation.) Like the Vedic Brahmins and the Buddhist monastics, the epic narrators preserve and transmit important cultural memory in oral form, with as much fidelity as possible.[8] Like the monastic centers of the Buddhists, the ashrams of Valmiki and Vyasa are set apart from royal courts and the cities, but not so far that they are isolated from them. The epic authors speak *of* the world of Kshatriya warriors, Brahmin sages, and royal courts from a critical distance, and they speak *to* that world when they perform their compositions before courtly audiences. The epics seek a broader audience well beyond the restricted audience of the Vedas. When Valmiki sends Lava and Kusha out, he tells them to perform his musical poem along the highways and byways, as well as before the usual male elites. The songs they sing can captivate minds, even that of the self-controlled king Rama, but they also offer moral and religious instruction to all classes of society.

Mahabharata: Crisis and Renewal in the Ruling Order

It is no accident that Valmiki's question to Narada that opens the *Ramayana* concerns Dharma. Valmiki wonders if such an exemplar of righteousness can even be found in the world today. The *Mahabharata* likewise is deeply concerned with Dharma. The epic protagonists devote long discussions to exploring this crucial value and how best to act in accord with it. In the *Mahabharata*, they often fail in their efforts. Following Dharma is hard.

These two Sanskrit epics begin from an awareness that something has gone awry within the ruling class. The longstanding ethos of the Kshatriya warriors and monarchs somehow is not fit for new circumstances. In the *Mahabharata*, the accumulated misconduct of one illustrious clan of Kshatriyas, the descendants of King Bharata, leads to internecine conflict and war involving two sets of cousins, the Pandavas and the Kauravas. The Pandava protagonists of the *Mahabharata* experience the crisis in the most cataclysmic form, a great eighteen-day war that wipes out nearly the entire ruling class. Through these tribulations, a chastened Yudhishthira and his Pandava brothers gain an education in Dharma that enables them finally to reorganize a more just society ruled by a righteous king.

The new Dharma of the epics differs in important respects from older Vedic understandings of the term. It departs significantly from the Dharma as understood by the Shramana orders of Buddhists and Jains, and it differs from Ashoka Maurya's imperial definition of Dharma. In all cases Dharma signifies virtuous conduct leading to a good life, within a broader vision of social and cosmic

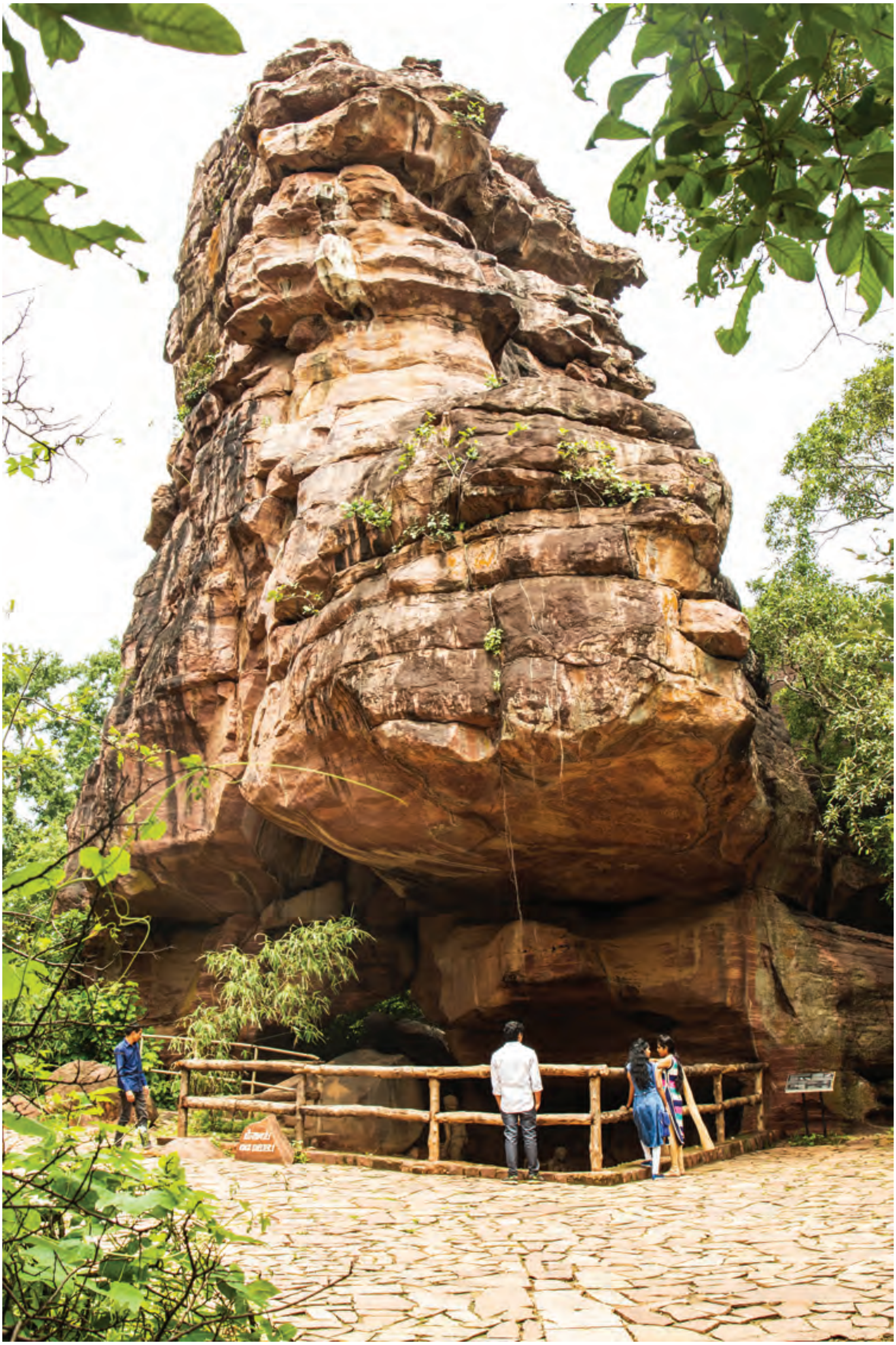


PLATE 1. Rock Formations, Bhimbetka, Madhya Pradesh.

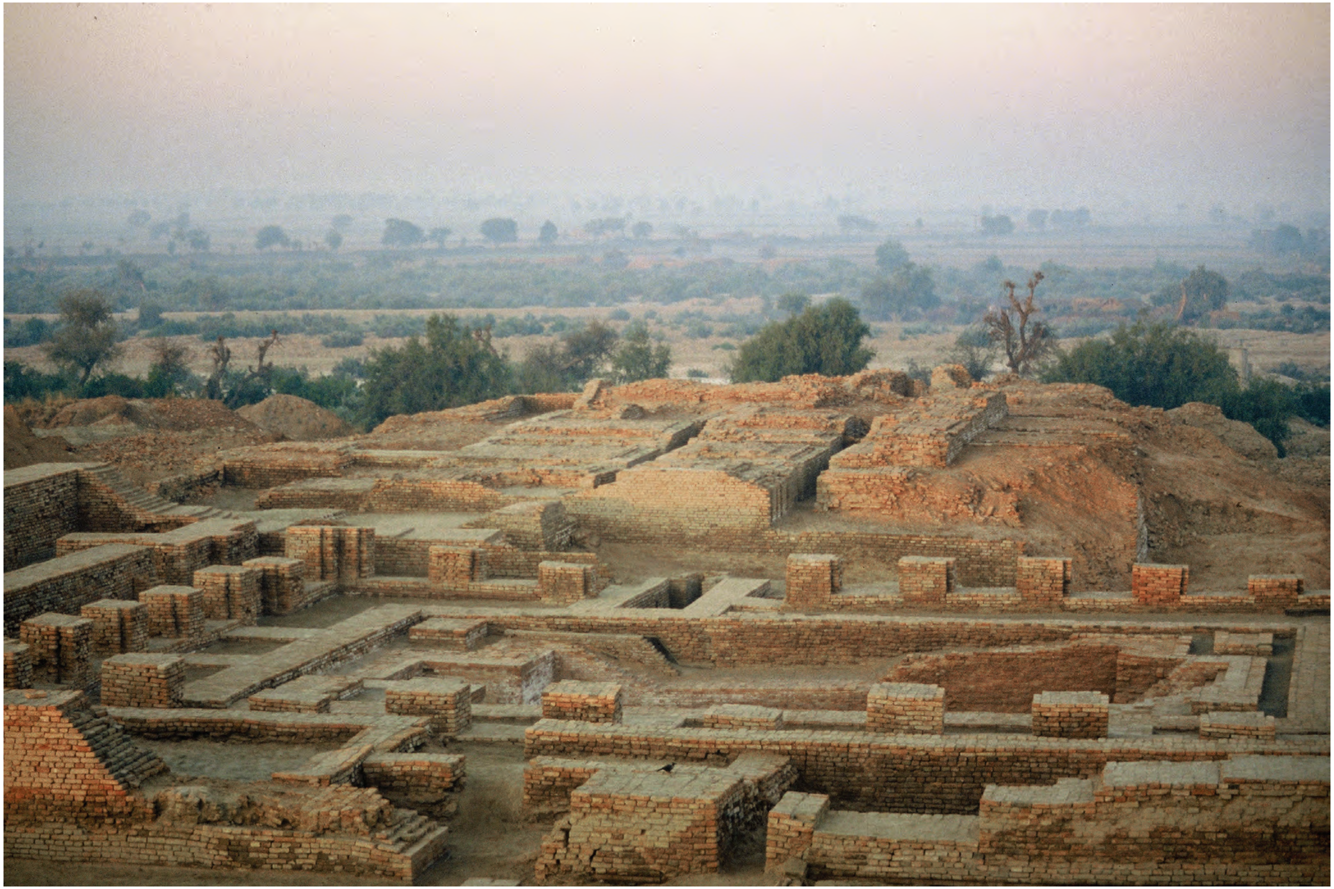


PLATE 2. Great Bath and Granary, Mohenjo-daro, Pakistan. Copyright © J. M. Kenoyer/Harappa.com, Courtesy of Dept. of Archaeology and Museums, Govt. of Pakistan.

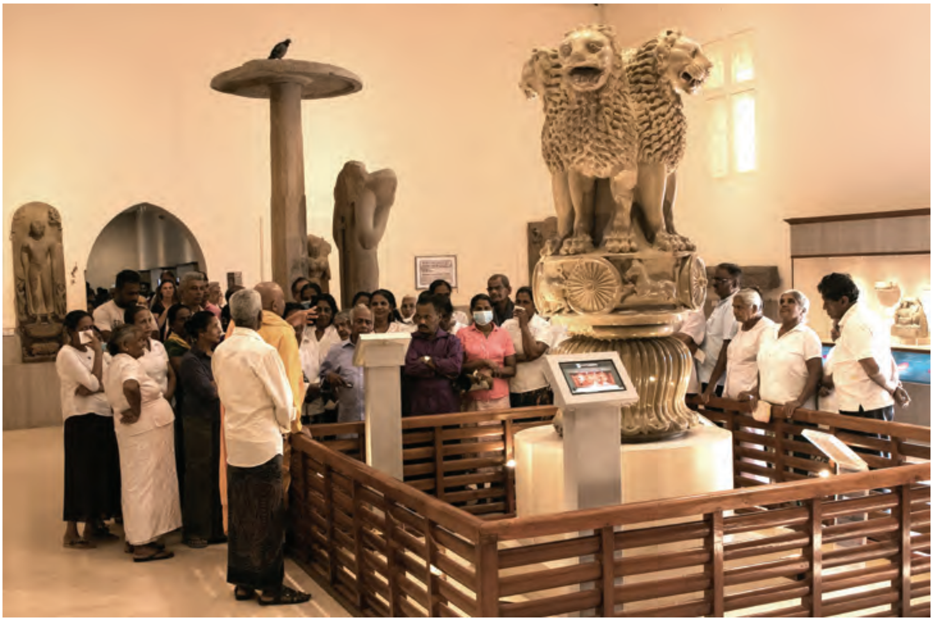


PLATE 3. Sarnath Pillar Capital, mid-3rd century BCE. Archaeological Museum Sarnath, Bihar.

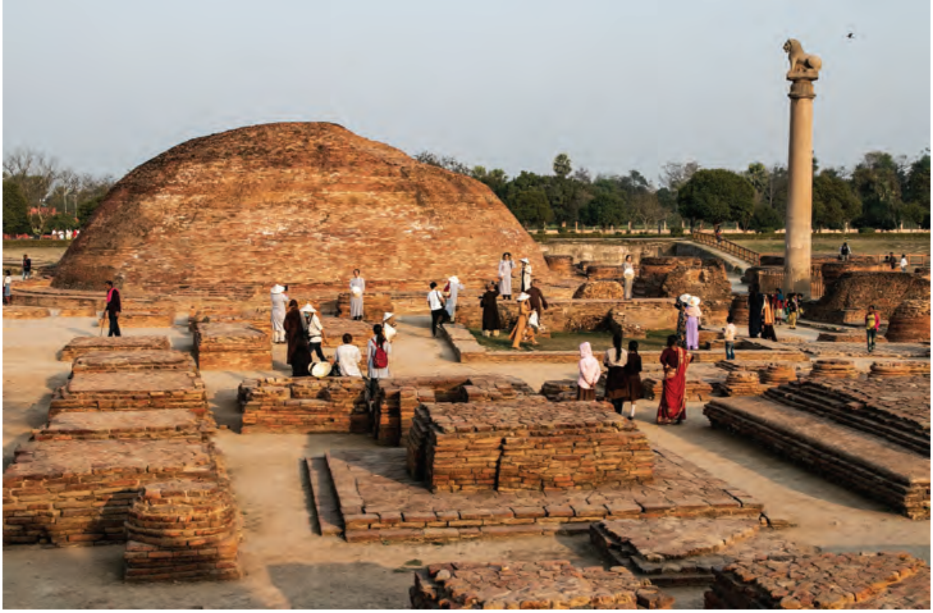


PLATE 4. Vaishali Stupa and Ashoka Pillar. Vaishali, Bihar.

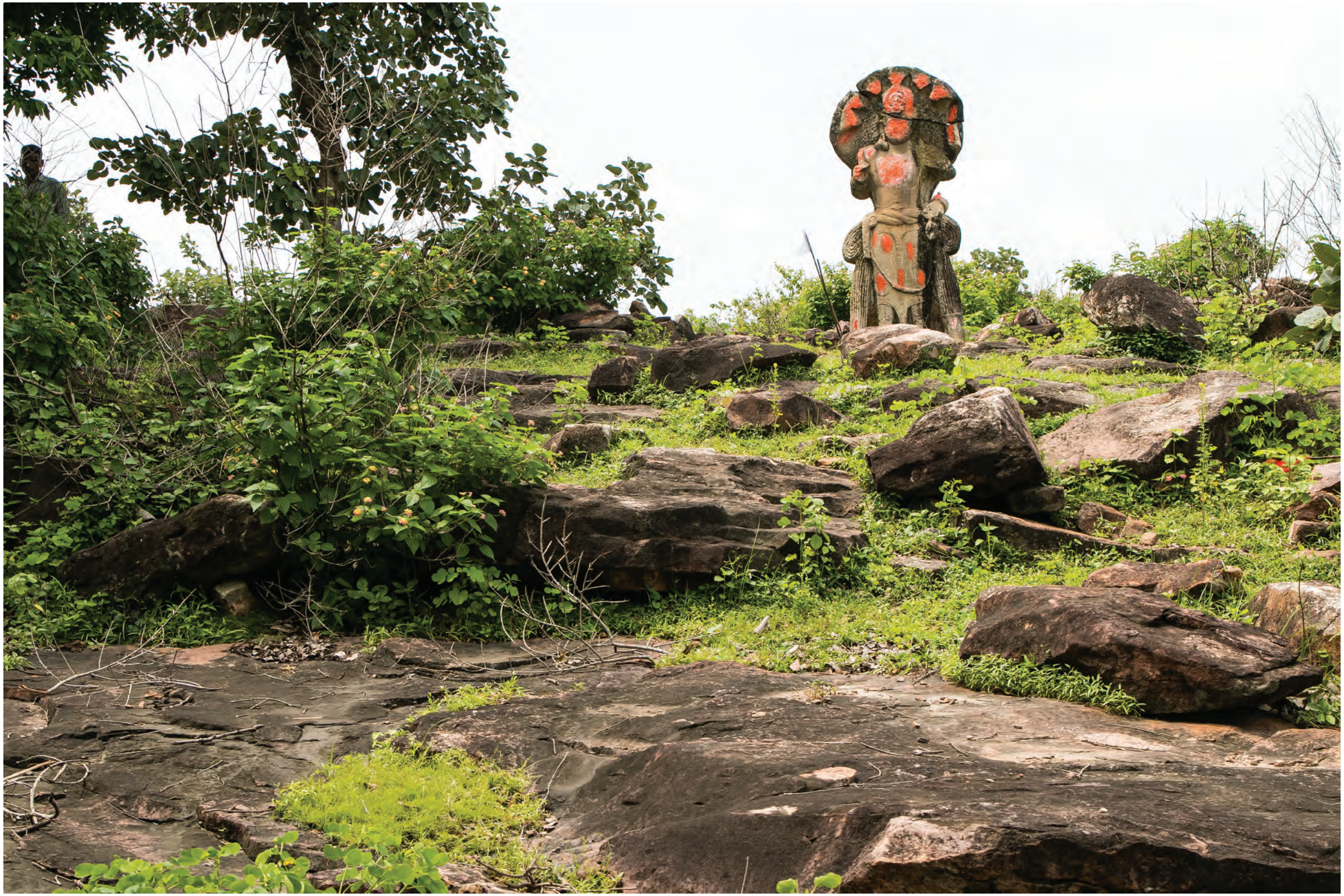


PLATE 5. Standing Naga, in field shrine. Nagauri, Madhya Pradesh.

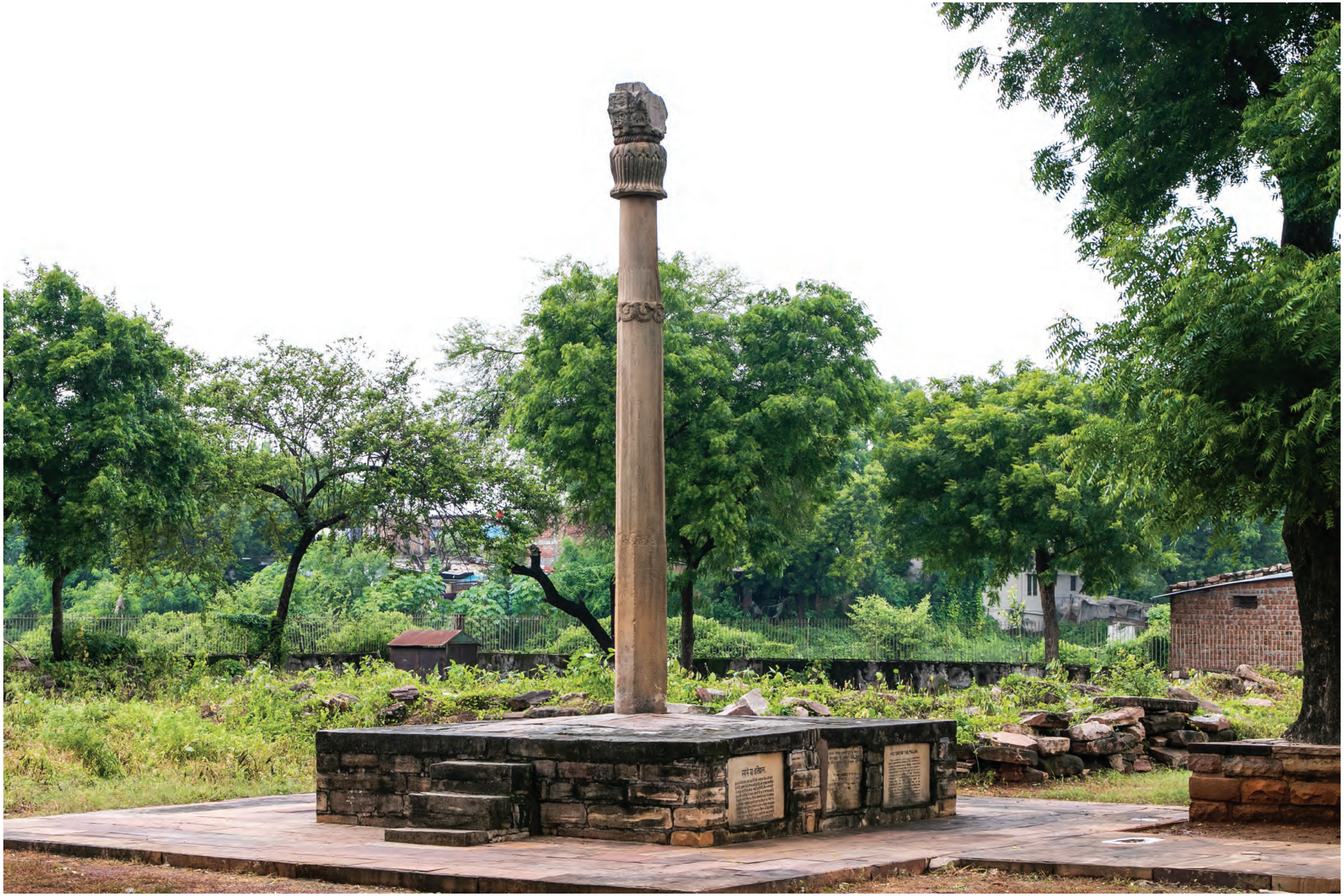


PLATE 6. Heliodorus's Garuda Pillar, ca. 100 BCE. Vidisha (modern Besnagar), Madhya Pradesh.

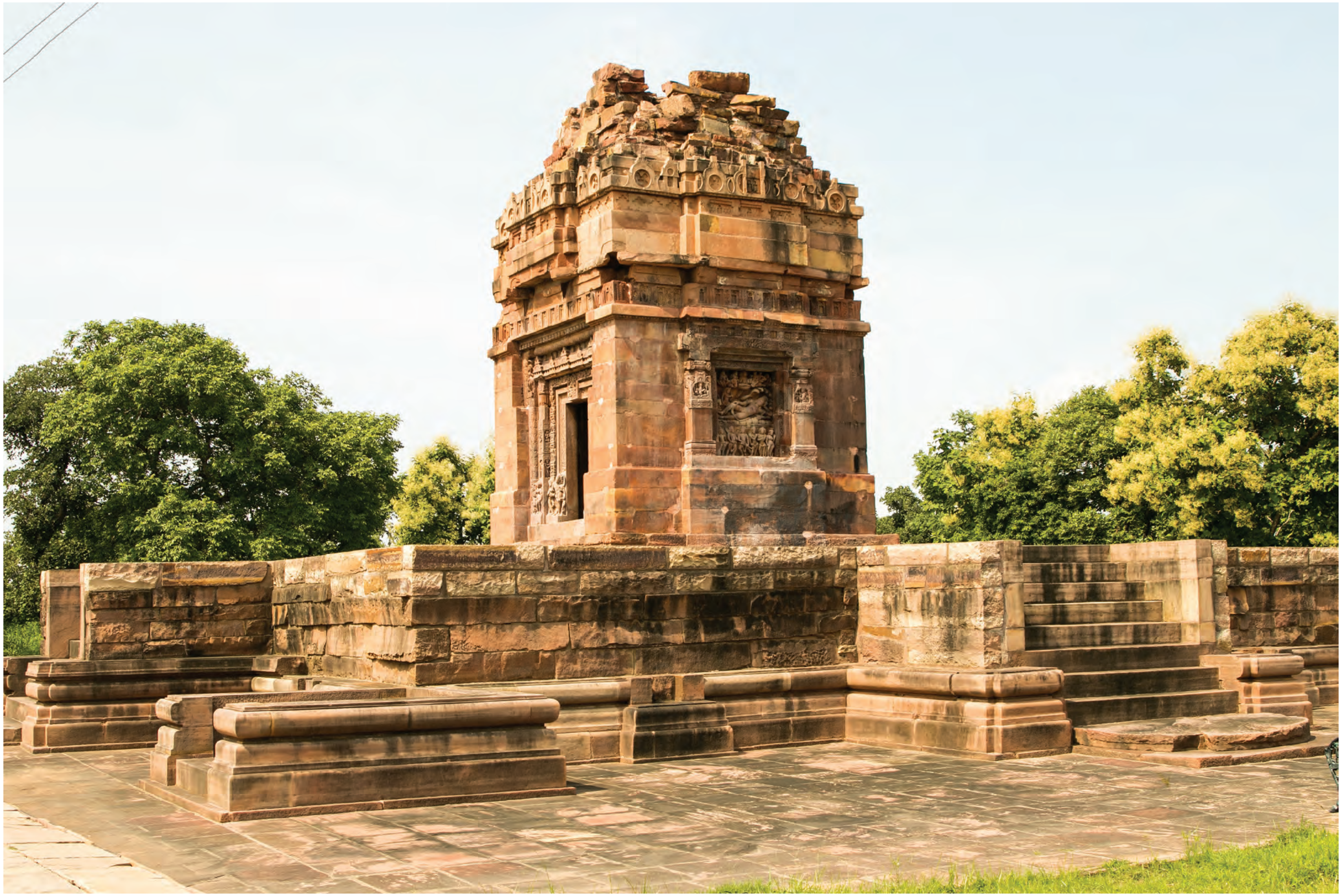


PLATE 7. “Dashavatara” Vishnu Temple, 500–525 CE. Deogarh, Uttar Pradesh.

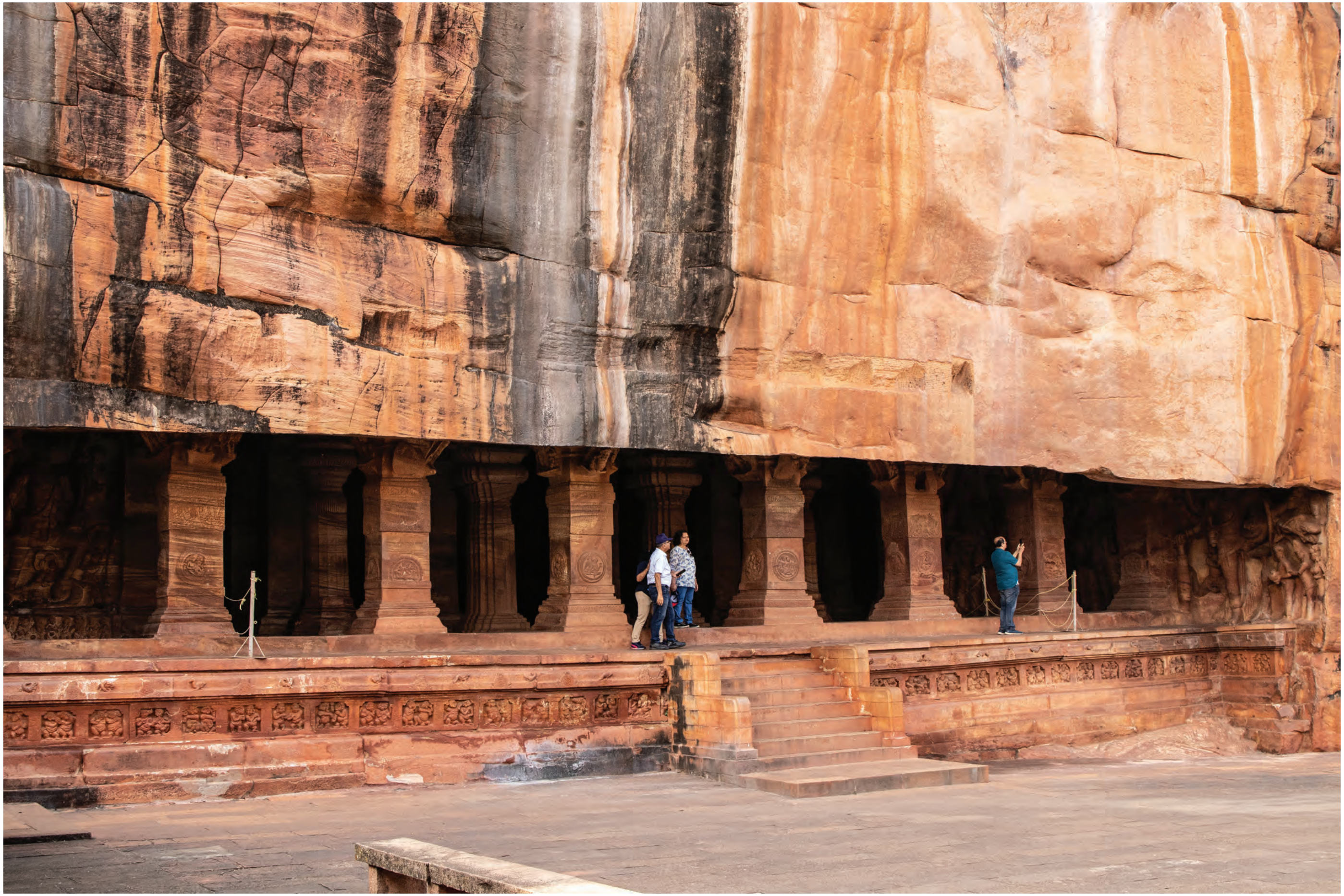


PLATE 8. Mahavishnu Cave Temple of Mangalesha, Badami Cave 3, 578 CE. Badami, Karnataka.

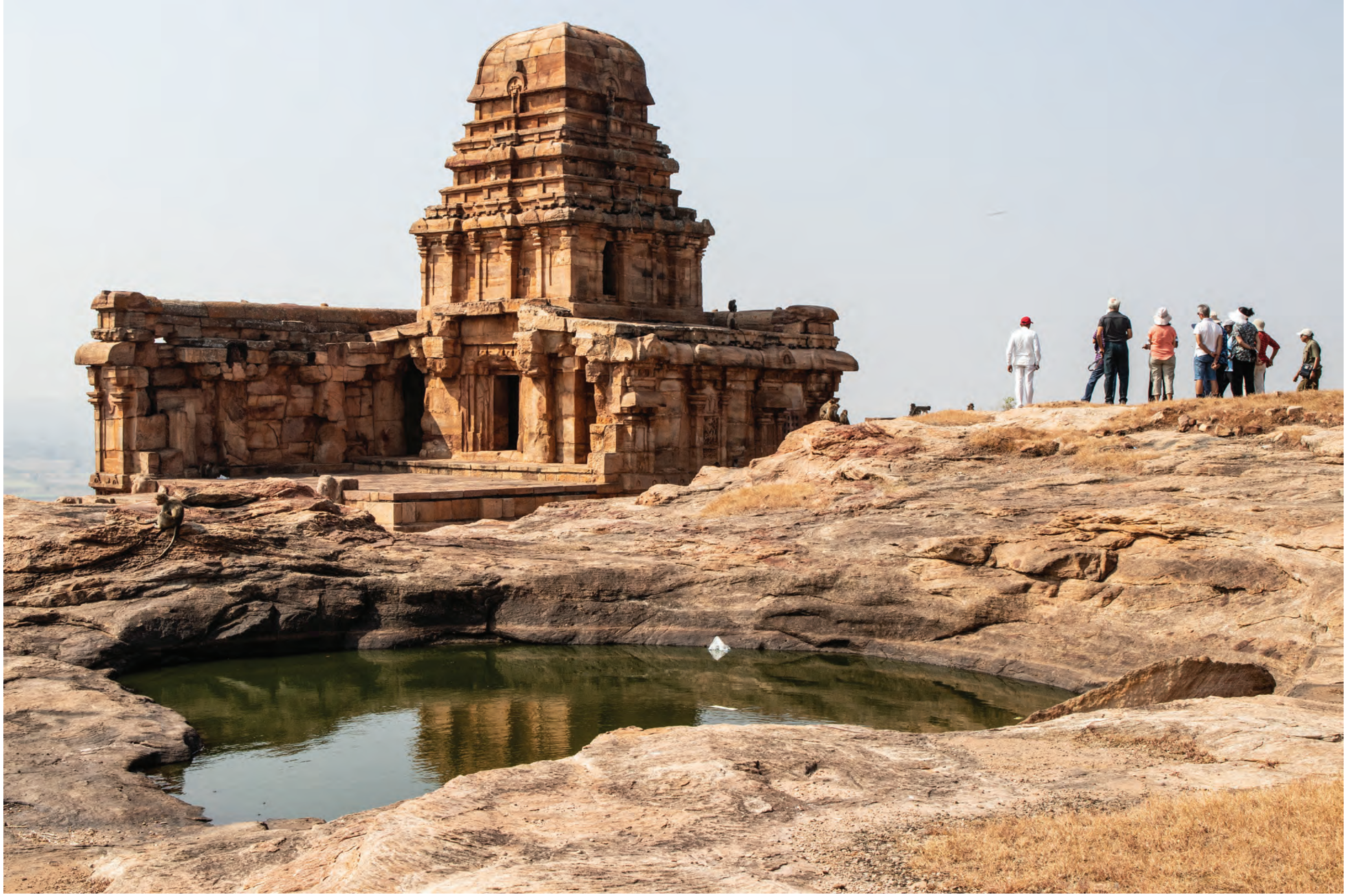


PLATE 9. “Upper Shivalaya” Vishnu Temple, Badami Fort, ca. 625 CE. Badami, Karnataka.

harmony. But the shape of that good life and the contours of a righteous society can take many forms. The two Sanskrit epics offer a powerful new vision of Dharma, conveyed through the compelling medium of epic storytelling.

Corruption, Lawlessness, and War

"Tell me," the Kshatriya ruler Janamejaya asks the sage Vyasa, "how did the rupture between the Kauravas and Pandavas take place? And how did that great war occur between my ancestors, which brought death to so many beings?" (MBh 1.54.19-20) Janamejaya is the great-grandson of Arjuna, the foremost Pandava warrior in that battle. Vyasa is a divine-eyed witness to those events and composer of a lengthy account of them. Vyasa turns to his Brahmin pupil Vaishampayana and instructs him to tell the tale to the king. As Vaishampayana relates it to Janamejaya, the *Mahabharata* is a narrative of toxic discord within a ruling family, leading to irreconcilable division and a fierce eighteen-day war, followed by the postwar establishment of a new, more lawful, or Dharma-based, regime.

Before he narrates this human story, Vaishampayana first sets out the cosmic stakes. Once upon a time, he tells Janamejaya, Kshatriyas ruled over the earth adhering to Dharma. It was the Krita Yuga, the Golden Age. Kshatriyas offered great sacrifices and gave out generous honoraria to the priests. Brahmins learned all the Vedas and never recited their sacred texts within earshot of Shudras. "All the classes were intent only on their own duties, and in this way the Dharma did not diminish" (MBh 1.58.22). Cows and women gave birth at the proper time, trees produced ample fruit and flowers in the right seasons, and the earth flourished with an abundance of living beings.

Into this paradise of Dharma, demons entered. The Asuras had been defeated by the Devas, and they took refuge on earth. The demons were born in all sorts of bodies, including cows, horses, donkeys, camels, oxen, flesh-eating animals, elephants, and deer. The most powerful demons took birth as human kings. As demons are wont to do, they spread chaos in their wake.

> They oppressed the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and even the Shudras. Still other creatures were harassed by the demon-kings. Bringing fear and destruction to all the classes of beings, they spread out everywhere, hundreds and thousands of them. Impious and arrogant in their strength, drunk on strong liquor, they even attacked the great sages in their ashrams. (MBh 1.58.32-34)

It got so bad that goddess Earth herself, sagging from the burden of these cruel demon-kings, went to the god Brahman to ask for help. Brahman in turn ordered that all the gods take birth on earth with portions of themselves, to oppose the demons. Finally the gods solicited the Highest Being, Vishnu Narayana, and he too agreed to be born on earth, in order to purge Earth of her oppressive burden.

So, from one perspective, Vaishampayana suggests, the story of the great war of Janamejaya's ancestors can be seen as a battle between gods and demons over the fate of the earth. The gods led by Vishnu intervene on earth to rid it of demons who are masquerading as Kshatriya rulers. But it is not merely an allegory; it is much more a very human tale of greed, corruption, and growing lawlessness among the powerful.

The one hundred Kaurava brothers and the five Pandava brothers belong to a distinguished Kshatriya lineage. They are all descended from the great King Bharata. But Bharata's ruling successors have failed to maintain proper Kshatriya self-restraint. Things begin to go wrong with Bharata's great-great-grandson Shantanu. Vaishampayana relates to Janamejaya (who is also heir to this lineage) a gothic family history full of miscegenation across class lines, infanticide, unwarranted female power over husbands, disruptions to patrilineal inheritance, forcible abduction of women for wives, levirate, out-of-wedlock sexual intercourse, abandonment of infants, and sexual coupling with gods. While maintaining their ruling power in the kingdom of the Kurus in northern India, the Bharata dynasty has strayed from the Dharma conduct suitable for rulers. By the time of the Kauravas and Pandavas, confusion and rivalry prevail in the extended family.

The central antagonists of the *Mahabharata* are cousins. The Kaurava brothers are the offspring of the blind king Dhritarashtra; the Pandavas are the offspring of Dhritarashtra's brother Pandu. After Pandu dies, the two sets of cousins are brought up together in the Hastinapura court, and they receive full training as Kshatriya warriors. As they grow up, games of strength and skill give way to competitive jealousy and escalating rancor. Always in the background of their internecine struggle is the unsettled question of royal succession. Who will succeed Dhritarashtra as king? Will it be his own eldest son Duryodhana, or should it be Yudhishthira, the first son of Pandu?

The Kauravas try to remove their opponents through assassination. They burn down a palace made of highly flammable lacquer where the Pandavas are staying. The Pandavas escape through a tunnel and go into hiding disguised as Brahmins. During their incognito travels, they win the princess Draupadi as a wife in a contest at her royal *svayamvara* ("bride's selection"). With Draupadi's family the Pandavas gain a powerful ally, and they also form an alliance with the prince of the Vrishni clan ruling in Dvaraka, Krishna. With their new supporters, the

Pandavas return to Hastinapura and demand a share of the kingdom. To avoid an outright showdown, the family elders decide to partition the kingdom, and they give to the Pandavas an uninhabited wilderness tract, the Khandava region. Unfortunately, this does not put an end to the rivalry.

After Arjuna and Krishna incinerate the Khandava forest, the Pandavas establish their rule in the area and construct a great palace in their new capital, Indraprastha. (This epic capital site, it is believed, lies in the center of India's modern capital, Delhi.) Yudhishthira proves to be a successful ruler, and the kingdom prospers. After some time, and a little nudge from the meddling sage Narada, Yudhishthira decides he must perform the old Vedic ritual of royal consecration, the Rajasuya. This is an act of considerable hubris. In the *Mahabharata*, the Rajasuya is no simple legitimation of dominion over a limited region; it constitutes a claim to imperial sovereignty, *samraj* or "total rule." Other ruling Kshatriyas are to be subordinate to this king of kings. Yudhishthira must subdue any other kings, like Jarasandha of Magadha, who might harbor similar notions of their own imperial sway. (We note in passing that Magadha is the region where Ashoka's imperial capital was located. The *Mahabharata* is not a work of history, but it often suggests analogues.) Then he can invite all the Kshatriyas and rulers of the known world—even including Rome, Antioch, and Alexandria, the "city of the Greeks"—to participate in his ceremony.[9]

Yudhishthira's successful Rajasuya only stokes the jealousy and humiliation of the Kauravas. To regain the upper hand, Duryodhana and his associates invite the Pandavas to come to Hastinapura, to see their new palace and to enjoy a friendly game of dice. Duryodhana knows that Yudhishthira will be unable to turn down a challenge, even though he is not a skillful gambler. In the not-so-friendly dice match, Yudhishthira loses again and again to Duryodhana's uncle, Shakuni. Desperately he wagers ever larger stakes, until at length he gambles away his kingdom, his brothers, himself, and lastly his wife Draupadi. The victorious Kauravas have Draupadi dragged by her hair into the male-only assembly hall. They taunt her sexually and try to disrobe her in public. This shocking transgression is an unforgivable affront to her five husbands. Vows of revenge are made. From this point on, no reconciliation will be possible between the cousins. After the dice match and a second one, which Yudhishthira also loses, the Pandavas are banished to the forest for thirteen years. As the five brothers troop off from the city in their forest attire of deerskin, accompanied by their wife Draupadi in her single blood-stained cloth, everyone anticipates that a terrible collision is bound to come as soon as the Pandavas complete their time in exile.

When war looms thirteen years later, both sets of cousins line up allies. Other rulers and warriors eagerly sign up. Battle is what they train for. It is the opportunity for them to display the strength, valor, and courage that are crucial to the Kshatriya ethos. As it turns out, they all have their own rivalries and quests for vengeance. The entire ruling class throughout the Indian subcontinent joins with one side or the other. The intra-family conflict in the Bharata clan becomes an all-encompassing confrontation threatening the social order as a whole. As James Fitzgerald puts it, "The central narrative of the *Great Bharata* recounts the progressive polarization of the entire royal Kshatriya caste and the annihilation of it through the great war which stands at the center of the text."[10]

The war is devastating. As with many real-world wars, a military struggle that begins with hopes of glory and careful observation of the proper rules of engagement (called the "Dharma of battle" or *yuddha-dharma*) deteriorates into brutality and ends in catastrophic loss. As the eighteen-day battle continues and casualties mount on both sides, the combatants resort to any means necessary to defeat their opponents. Many of the more egregious violations of battlefield etiquette are carried out by the Pandavas, with the encouragement of their adviser Krishna. They strike down their most formidable enemies when those fighters are immobilized or weaponless, and they employ a blatant falsehood to demoralize and murder their former teacher Drona. The Pandava brother Bhima drinks the blood of one Kaurava opponent then immobilizes Duryodhana with a mace-blow below the belt. On the eighteenth day the Kaurava warrior Ashvatthaman, Drona's grieving son, bitterly cites these Pandava transgressions to rationalize a devastating night raid of revenge on the Pandava camp, in which he and two cohorts assassinate thousands of enemy soldiers in their sleep, including all five sons of Draupadi and the Pandava brothers.

By the end of the Bharata war enormous numbers of warriors lie dead. Yudhishthira's postbattle tally holds that over one and a half billion men have been killed, and twenty-four thousand have gone missing. Their corpses cover Kurukshetra, along with the carcasses of elephants and horses. Hordes of jackals, crows, vultures, goblins, ghouls, and flesh-eating demons scavenge the fields. Nearly all the males of the Kshatriya class of India have been wiped out.

And yet, war has also cleared the ground. The corpses are piled high atop a great pyre of broken weapons and wooden chariots for a gigantic mass-cremation, and the Kshatriya women perform libations for the dead in the Ganges River. With so much of the ruling class competition annihilated, it will become possible for the victorious Pandavas to establish a new world order, an imperial kingdom based on a better set of values. It will require a new Dharma of kingship. That will be the task of the eldest Pandava brother, Yudhishthira.

The Hard Dharma of the Kshatriya Wife

While the Kshatriya males are killing one another on the battlefield at Kurukshetra, their mothers, wives, and daughters remain behind, ensconced in the women's quarters of the city palaces, awaiting the outcome. Afterward, they are brought out to the killing fields. As they survey the damage and look for their men, they throw their arms in the air, let their hair fly loose, and shriek like raucous ospreys. They stumble about among the corpses and fight the jackals, crows, and goblins as they search for the remains of their fathers, husbands, and sons. Their grief is overwhelming.

The *Mahabharata* devotes its greatest attention to the public words and actions of the male protagonists in this patriarchal society. But it also acknowledges the trials and tribulations of the Kshatriya women. The epic allows female characters to give voice to their suffering and their resounding protests. The women of the *Mahabharata* have their own perspectives, their own purposes, and their own ideals of conduct. Through their actions, they can also gain both interpersonal and supernatural powers.

The Dharma of women differs from that of men. It is a fundamental assumption of the epic authors that Dharma, as a code of righteous conduct, is differentiated. Proper conduct differs according to class, and it also differs according to gender. The Dharma of husbands and fathers diverges from that of wives and mothers. As with the ranked social classes, there is a hierarchy to gender relations. Epic society is a patriarchal one. Males enjoy a higher social status, but there is also a reciprocity within their relationships. In the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, the principal female protagonists—Draupadi and Sita—articulate their own understandings of the Dharma appropriate to a wife (*patni-dharma*), and they are willful in its pursuit. They see it as the key to living a good female life and as an appropriate and sufficient religious aspiration for a woman. They also expect in return to receive protection (*rakshana*) from their husbands. They speak out bitterly when their men fail them.

When Draupadi has been exiled with her five husbands in the forest, Krishna's young wife Satyabhama approaches her for advice. "How is it," she asks, "that the Pandavas follow your orders and never get angry? For they are always obedient to you and all of them look at you with such pleasure" (MBh 3.222.4-5). What is her secret? Satyabhama wonders if Draupadi has performed a vow or done some special austerities. Has she perhaps used magical spells or drugged them with herbs? Satyabhama hopes to gain the same obedience from her flirtatious husband.

Draupadi answers with disdain toward those deceitful female techniques. These are the practices of bad women. "When a husband realizes that his wife has resorted to using spells or drugs on him," she says, "he will recoil from her as if a snake had got into the house" (MBh 3.222.11), Instead, Draupadi has gained her husband's compliance through her own service. She renounces her own ego, lets go of her desires and her anger, and intently serves her husbands and their other wives. (Draupadi may be the wife of five husbands, but her husbands have other wives as well. Polygamy is common among Kshatriyas in the epics. Satyabhama lives amid Krishna's famously large cohort of wives. Rama and Sita, by contrast, are determinedly monogamous.) Draupadi emphasizes the thoroughness of her service: she is first up in the morning and last to lie down at night. She sweeps the storerooms, keeps the forest home spotless, and makes sure that the food is good. Even when Yudhishthira was king and Draupadi enjoyed the assistance of a multitude of servants, it was she who tirelessly supervised them and made sure that the royal court ran smoothly. She kept control of the domestic budget.

Draupadi avers that this is the Dharma appropriate to a Kshatriya wife. "For I believe that my Dharma as a woman forever depends on my husband. He is a god. That is my path to fulfillment, no other. How could that go wrong?" (MBh 3.222.35) She explains to Satyabhama that this is how she has exerted interpersonal power within her domestic sphere. "Through my attentiveness and constant exertion, and through my honoring of the elders, my husbands have become obedient to me" (MBh 3.222.37). Draupadi admits that it works like a magical spell. "I am the first to wake up and the last to go to bed. I do this all the time, Satyabhama. This is my magical charm. I do know how to put this powerful charm on my husbands. I do it without following the tricks of bad women, nor would I wish to do so" (MBh 3.222.56-57). It is indeed a kind of vow: a vow toward one's husband (*pati-vrata*), viewed as a god.

A *vrata* (commonly translated as "vow") is a voluntary act of self-restraint, a restrictive observance undertaken by an individual toward some end. Most often it is directed toward worldly benefits, not to a transcendent goal. Draupadi's use of the term to refer to her own self-sacrificing dedication to the welfare of her husbands—giving up her ego, desires, and anger—shares in the general renunciatory ethos of religious specialists, but here vrata is suitable to the this-worldly situation of married women. She dedicates herself to her husbands, as one might dedicate oneself to a god. As a side effect, her husbands become obedient to her, at least within the shared domestic sphere.

In the epic narratives female renunciation may confer still greater powers. The most dramatic example in the *Mahabharata* is that of Gandhari, wife of Dhritarashtra and mother to the one hundred Kaurava brothers. When Gandhari is a young woman, her father agrees to a marriage proposal that will betroth her to Dhritarashtra, who is a powerful ruler, though blind. As soon as Gandhari learns of his blindness, she acts without hesitation. "She took a cloth, folded it many times, and bound it around her eyes. Wholly devoted to her husband-vow, she declared her intention never to surpass her husband" (MBh 1.103.13). And so she remains over the many years of marriage, always adhering to her vow of never being better than her husband in any way. She constantly engages in this hard austerity, and from it she amasses tremendous latent power. After the great battle, in which she has lost all one hundred of her sons, she temporarily gains divine vision, with which she can see the whole horrendous field of battle. Her glance is so forceful that when Yudhishthira, antagonist of her dead Kaurava children, bows down to touch her feet in supplication, a stray ray from her eyes shoots out under the lower edge of her blindfold and permanently singes his fingernails. Her inner power is great enough even to curse Krishna, the incarnate god, for his complicity in the war that has left her without sons.

As Gandhari's case indicates, the husband-vow does not exempt Dharma-following wives from suffering. As daughters, wives, and mothers within the Kshatriya class, they live with the expectation that the men of their families may die in battle. Gandhari loses all one hundred sons at Kurukshetra. On the victor's side, Draupadi loses all five of her sons. In the *Ramayana*, similarly, the female protagonist Sita suffers forest-exile, abduction, sexual threat, distrust, and final abandonment, all the while adhering to her own rigorous husband-vow.

In return for the female Dharma of service to male fathers and husbands, women expect protection from their men. A foundational principle of the patriarchal Kshatriya family is that males protect females from outside threats. Draupadi proclaims her dedication to the welfare of her husbands, but when they fail to fulfill their responsibility to her, she castigates them forcefully and bitterly. In the dice match at Hastinapura, Yudhishthira fails her in the most abject way, first by gambling away his own freedom and then that of his wife. Draupadi is dragged into the men's assembly in the most humiliating possible manner. The Kauravas taunt her and abuse her. Among the males, Draupadi insists on raising a question of legal Dharma that even the most sagacious elders cannot answer. If

Yudhishthira had already lost his freedom, how could he have the standing to stake hers?

As the Pandavas leave the city to go into exile, Draupadi pronounces a curse on the Kauravas and the women they protect:

> For those who have done this to me, in fourteen years' time, their women—with their husbands dead, their sons dead, their relatives and friends dead, their bodies smeared with their relatives' blood, their hair unbound, menstruating—will offer water libations for their deceased men, while the Pandavas enter Hastinapura. (MBh 2.71.19-20)

Her Kaurava abusers and their wives are not the only targets of her rage. Draupadi also lashes out at her own husbands who have failed to defend her. During their forest exile, she denounces them at length to Krishna.

> I rebuke the Pandavas, so strong and eminent in battle, who just watched as their respectable Dharma-wife was molested! Damn the strength of Bhima! Damn the bowmanship of Arjuna! They stood by when those vile people violated me, Krishna. The eternal path of Dharma, always followed by good people, is that husbands—even weak ones—protect their wives. (MBh 3.13.58-60)

If the Pandava men have failed in this fundamental duty, she concludes, they cannot be her husbands.

> I have no husbands! I have no sons, Krishna. I do not have brothers or fathers. I have no relatives, not even you, because you all remorselessly abandoned me when those vile people violated me. My pain will never be appeased, since Karna laughed at me. (MBh 3.13.112-113)

Draupadi engages in angry hyperbole here. She never actually leaves her husbands. In the patriarchal social order of the epics, divorce and female autonomy are not feasible options. (However, her sister-turned-brother Shikhandin does explore this possibility.) Rather, she insistently urges her husbands to act on her behalf to get revenge on the Kauravas who have so dishonored her.

The breakdown in family solidarity when males fail in their duty of protection is a synecdoche of the larger demise of Kshatriya order. Just before the war begins, the middle Pandava brother Arjuna reflects on this collapse of family values. Standing in his chariot between the two armies, he observes to his charioteer Krishna that he is fighting his own family: teachers, fathers, sons, grandfathers, uncles, fathers-in-law, grandsons, brothers-in-law, and other in-laws.

> When the family is destroyed, the eternal Dharma of the family perishes. When family-Dharma perishes, lawlessness (*adharma*) spreads through the entire family. From that spread of lawlessness, Krishna, the women in the family are defiled. When the women are defiled, there is mixing of the classes, and that mixing leads both the family-destroyers and the family itself right to hell. The ancestor-spirits are deprived of their offerings of rice and water. From the sins of those who kill their own families, which brings about the mixing of classes, both class-Dharma and eternal family-Dharma fall into ruin. (MBh 6.23.40-43; BhG 1.40-43)

The hell that the disintegration of Dharma has brought the extended Bharata family appears at the battlefield of Kurukshetra. All Draupadi's curses on the Kauravas bear their dire fruit. But from the terrible annihilation there also arises the possibility for the birth of a new order of Dharma.

Education of a Dharma-King

At the end of the great war, one might expect Yudhishthira and the Pandavas to rejoice. They have defeated their implacable enemies and they now preside uncontested over the powerful Kuru kingdom. But as they enter the capital, a voice speaks up from the crowd. A mendicant wearing a renouncer's topknot, Charvaka, claims to speak on behalf of the Brahmins.

> All these Brahmins have asked me to speak for them. They say, "Let there be a curse on you, evil king, for the murder of your relatives. How could you possibly become king when you have exterminated your own kinsmen? You brought about the death of your teachers, who were attacked on your command." (MBh 12.39.26-27)[11]

The other Brahmins quickly disavow Charvaka's denunciation of the new ruler, but Yudhishthira himself is deeply affected by these words. They echo his own grief and his sense of personal responsibility for the war. Before returning to the city, he has already expressed to Arjuna his disgust with the Kshatriya ethos and his preference for the ways of the renouncers.

> Damn the way of the Kshatriyas! Damn our own strength! And damn the passions that led us to this calamity! Excellent are the constant virtues of those who dwell in the forest: forgiveness, self-restraint, purity, congeniality, unselfishness, nonviolence, and truthfulness in speech. But from our own greed and delusion, we have been stubborn and proud. Now we have reached this

> condition due to our desire to enjoy a mere kingdom. No one could make us rejoice in kingship, even dominion over all three worlds, now that we have seen our relatives, who coveted the same prize, dead on the ground. (MBh 12.7.5-8)

Although Yudhishthira would prefer to alleviate his trauma by joining those virtuous forest dwellers, all those around him declare that he is the rightful king.

Yudhishthira's deep ambivalence raises a dilemma at the heart of the *Mahabharata*. Is it possible to reconcile the core values of Dharma—truthfulness, nonviolence, family loyalty, respect for elders—with the tasks of kingship, which require the exercise of force and violence? Can a ruler integrate the renunciatory virtues of the forest dwellers with the practical this-worldly duties of royal authority? The *Mahabharata* seeks to answer this conundrum for Yudhishthira. Through the teachings of Bhishma, Yudhishthira's respected elder, it sets out a new model for a Dharma-king.

In post-Mauryan India, many felt the need for such a new formulation. The older Vedic model, centered on patronage of sacrificial rites, was no longer adequate. Nor was the amoral pursuit of royal power, as advanced in the developing science of politics (Arthashastra) identified with Chanakya or Kautilya, acceptable. In the *Mahabharata* the culture of the Kshatriya class pursuing the fruits of sovereignty without restraint had led to the killing fields of Kurukshetra. The Mauryan ruler Ashoka had attempted to set forth a nonviolent royal policy based on Dharma. But his Dharma was grounded on Buddhist and Shramana premises, and it marginalized the Brahmin class and the role of Vedic sacrifice. The *Mahabharata* proposed a counter to Ashoka's Dharma kingship. It would maintain select elements of the older Vedic pattern, and it would reassert the role of Brahmins in articulating religious and ethical values. While accepting the social hierarchy of the four varnas, it also incorporated many of the yogic values of the renouncers and Shramanas. It would encompass all these within a new theistic vision, to serve as a foundation for this social Dharma. The epic places its most sustained presentation of this conception of kingship and Dharma in Bhishma's instructions to the reluctant king Yudhishthira, immediately after the battle, when a new world order presided over by a just ruler was both possible and necessary.

At the end of the war, Bhishma lies dying on the battlefield, pierced by innumerable arrows. His name, "Awesome One," refers to a vow of complete celibacy he had made as a young man on behalf of his father Shantanu. As a reward for this altruistic self-restraint, his father had given him the blessing of being able to choose the time of his own death. Even though mortally wounded, Bhishma lingers to carry out one more task. He is a surrogate grandfather to the Pandavas, honored for his military prowess as well as his pragmatic wisdom. And so, when Yudhishthira's doubts continue even after he is consecrated as king, his family, his advisers, and even the narrator-agent Vyasa (who is Yudhishthira's biological grandfather) all urge him to seek out Bhishma for counsel. Bhishma's deathbed teachings to Yudhishthira, constituting an awesome 37,900 lines of text (roughly the length of the Christian Bible), cover an immense range of matters. First and foremost, he responds to Yudhishthira's initial questions about kingship.

Yudhishthira approaches Bhishma, bows respectfully to his elder, and confesses that he considers kingship a great burden. Why should kingship be invested in one man? Where did kingship even come from?

> This word "king" keeps going around, Bhishma, but where did it come from? . . . A king has the same hands, head, and neck as other men. He is equal in intelligence and senses, equal in pains and pleasures. He has the same back, arms, and belly; the same semen, bones, and marrow; the same flesh and blood . . . He experiences life and death the same. He shares in all the characteristics of men. So how is it that one man governs others who are distinguished for their knowledge or heroism? How is it that this one person protects the entire earth, filled with valiant, heroic, and noble people? And why does the world long for the favor of that one man? (MBh 12.59.5-9)

Bhishma responds to Yudhishthira's question with an origin story. In the beginning, he relates, there was no king, no kingship, and no rod of punishment. Society maintained its own order through observance of Dharma. Then the usual suspects appeared: ignorance, desire, and avarice. Kingship arose because humans became confused and greedy and gradually lost track of proper conduct altogether. When humans stopped making their sacrificial offerings, the gods felt threatened. They went to their leaders for assistance, first Brahman and then Vishnu Narayana. Brahman composed an immense treatise on the science of government, and to put it into practice, Vishnu emitted from his mind a royal being, Virajas. But Virajas was too virtuous, too attracted to a life of renunciation, and he would not take up the task of kingship. After several more attempts to emanate a suitable king failed, Venu was born. He had the opposite disqualification. Dominated by passion and hatred, he abused his royal position and failed to follow Dharma toward his subjects. The sages had to kill this unrighteous ruler.

Finally the sages churned Venu's right hand and produced Prithu. Here at last was a proper king. Prithu quickly agreed to become king, and he insisted that Brahmins serve as his assistants. The gods performed a royal anointment of Prithu, and the god Vishnu invested some of his own energy into the new king. So, Bhishma concludes in answering Yudhishthira's question, the consecrated king has some of Vishnu's divine quality. This godly infusion distinguishes the king from all other men.

In Bhishma's story, monarchy is a divinely originated response to the social disorder that results from endemic human desire and greed. To protect society in its proper order, a king must not be too inclined toward the passive values of the renouncers, as Virajas was. That is Yudhishthira's failing as well, in Bhishma's view. But the king also must not be dominated by his own self-interest, as Venu was. This had been the case with many of the Kshatriyas whose greed and hostility had brought about the great war. If a king can exercise the proper degree of protection, judiciously mixing gentleness with harshness when necessary, all his subjects will be able to live their lives without anxiety, and the earth will yield up its bounty. Like Prithu, that king will restore Dharma to be supreme in the world.

If that is so, Yudhishthira follows up, then what exactly is Dharma? Bhishma first observes that there are values of Dharma that apply to everyone: truthfulness, generosity, patience, bearing children only with one's wife, purity, benevolence, sincerity, support of one's dependents, and freedom from anger. Such universal moral virtues remind us of the ethical foundations of the religious life and of the social ethics promoted by Ashoka Maurya. But for Bhishma, this is only the starting point of Dharma. Society consists of separate ranked classes of persons, and in a differentiated class society, each group has its own distinctive proclivities and duties. Bhishma reaffirms the old Vedic model of four varnas. Bhishma outlines the specific rules of Dharma as they apply for each varna. For Brahmins, self-restraint is a key virtue, and their duties center around recitation and transmission of the Vedas and performance of sacrificial ritual. Kshatriyas must be generous with their gifts. They should perform sacrificial rites for themselves, but not act as priests for others. They should recite the Vedas for themselves, but they are not qualified to teach them to others. Most important, they should protect all other creatures, and they should seek to be victorious in battle. The duties of Vaishyas involve taking care of livestock and other productive agricultural work. The creator god Prajapati made the Shudra to be a servant to the other classes, Bhishma says, and so Shudras should gain their greatest happiness through obedience to others.

Within his outline of an orderly hierarchical society, Bhishma recognizes that the human flaws of desire and greed can always lead to disorder. The crucial role of the king is to maintain and protect society by insuring that all classes adhere to their own duties. To do so, he must exercise the rod of punishment (*danda*). He must be energetic in enforcement, but also self-restrained. Without the threat of punishment, the strong would roast the weak on skewers, as one cooks fish. On the other hand, the king must not be overly aggressive in his use of the rod. "The king who is always gentle gets completely ignored," Bhishma advises the overly gentle Yudhishthira, "but people become fearful with a harsh king. Therefore, conduct yourself both ways" (MBh 12.56.21). The king should be like the lovely sun in springtime, neither too cool nor too hot.

A king who fails in his obligations is vulnerable. People should abandon the king who does not protect them, says Bhishma, as one would abandon a leaking boat on the ocean. Elsewhere, he recommends that a king who destroys Dharma should be slain, much as the sages had removed the vile king Venu. Bhishma warrants "passive resistance" of subjects against an incompetent or evil king through withdrawal of obedience, and he also condones "active resistance" through armed rebellion against a pernicious ruler.[12]

To ensure just rule, the Kshatriya king must be guided by Brahmin advisers and ministers. The unfettered unitary power of kingship poses great temptations to the ruler and great danger to the well-being of society. The role of Brahmins is to maintain within the sphere of royal rule those virtuous qualities of tolerance, self-restraint, and unselfishness that are the special characteristics of Brahmins and forest dwellers. The people of the kingdom gain happiness and security, says Bhishma, when these two elite classes, the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas, cooperate and complement one another in just rule.

Instructed by Bhishma, Yudhishthira is well equipped to become exactly this kind of Dharma-king. Born as the son of Dharma (who is embodied as a god), Yudhishthira is always inclined to listen to the teachings of Brahmins and sages. While he never fully expunges the remorse he feels for his role in the Kurukshetra war, he comes to accept his duty to become king and exercise the rod of punishment as necessary. He performs a great Horse Sacrifice to absolve his sin and to reinforce the imperial sovereignty of the Bharata clan. His brother Arjuna follows the sacrificial horse for a year and defeats any hostile claimant arrogant or foolish enough to oppose its movements. After years of rule, Yudhishthira hands off the kingdom to his successor, Parikshit. In the concluding book of the *Mahabharata*, Yudhishthira retires to the Himalayas with his brothers and their wife Draupadi to seek salvation.

Ramayana: Imperial Formations

At the start of the *Ramayana*, when Valmiki asks his question about Dharma, Narada answers with the name Rama.[13] If Yudhishthira must be educated into the principles of Dharma-kingship, Rama appears as a model of Kshatriya Dharma throughout his life. Valmiki's *Ramayana* serves as an exploration of Dharma in action and addresses questions about its universality.

Rama is the son of Dasharatha, a Kshatriya king ruling in Ayodhya, situated north of the Ganges on the Sarayu River in present-day Uttar Pradesh. Even among royalty Rama is special. In Valmiki's narrative, Rama and his three younger brothers are born out of a special child-producing Vedic sacrifice sponsored by Dasharatha. What is more, Valmiki informs us, Prince Rama is actually an incarnation of the High God Vishnu, come to earth to restore Dharma. Although Rama's divine identity is not generally recognized by other characters in the story, or by Rama himself, it has a crucial bearing throughout the story.

As Rama grows up, he is trained in the arts of the warrior class and in the principles of proper conduct. He becomes an exemplary prince, as Valmiki elaborates:

> He was of noble family, wise, cheerful, truthful, and upstanding. He had been educated well by elderly Brahmins, masters of both Dharma and Artha, and he too understood the essence of Dharma, Artha, and Kama. He had a good memory and an active intellect. He was knowledgeable and skilled when it came to worldly conduct and social practices . . . He was expert in the training and riding of elephants and horses, a master in the Veda of weapons, and renowned throughout the world as a chariot warrior. He could both attack and defend, and he could lead an army with skill. Even the gods and demons, if provoked, could never defeat him in battle. He was not spiteful, not arrogant, not selfish, and he had mastered his anger. He was never disrespectful to other beings, and he was not subject to the will of time. (Ram 2.2.18-19, 23–25)

Rama strikes exactly that balanced combination of self-restrained gentleness and formidable military skill that Bhishma advocates to Yudhishthira in his teachings on kingship and Dharma.

As the oldest son of the chief queen and the most highly accomplished and virtuous of Dasharatha's sons, Rama appears destined to become the worthy successor to his father's throne. However, when Dasharatha decides to retire and appoint Rama as king, court jealousy and intrigue intervene to alter his plan.

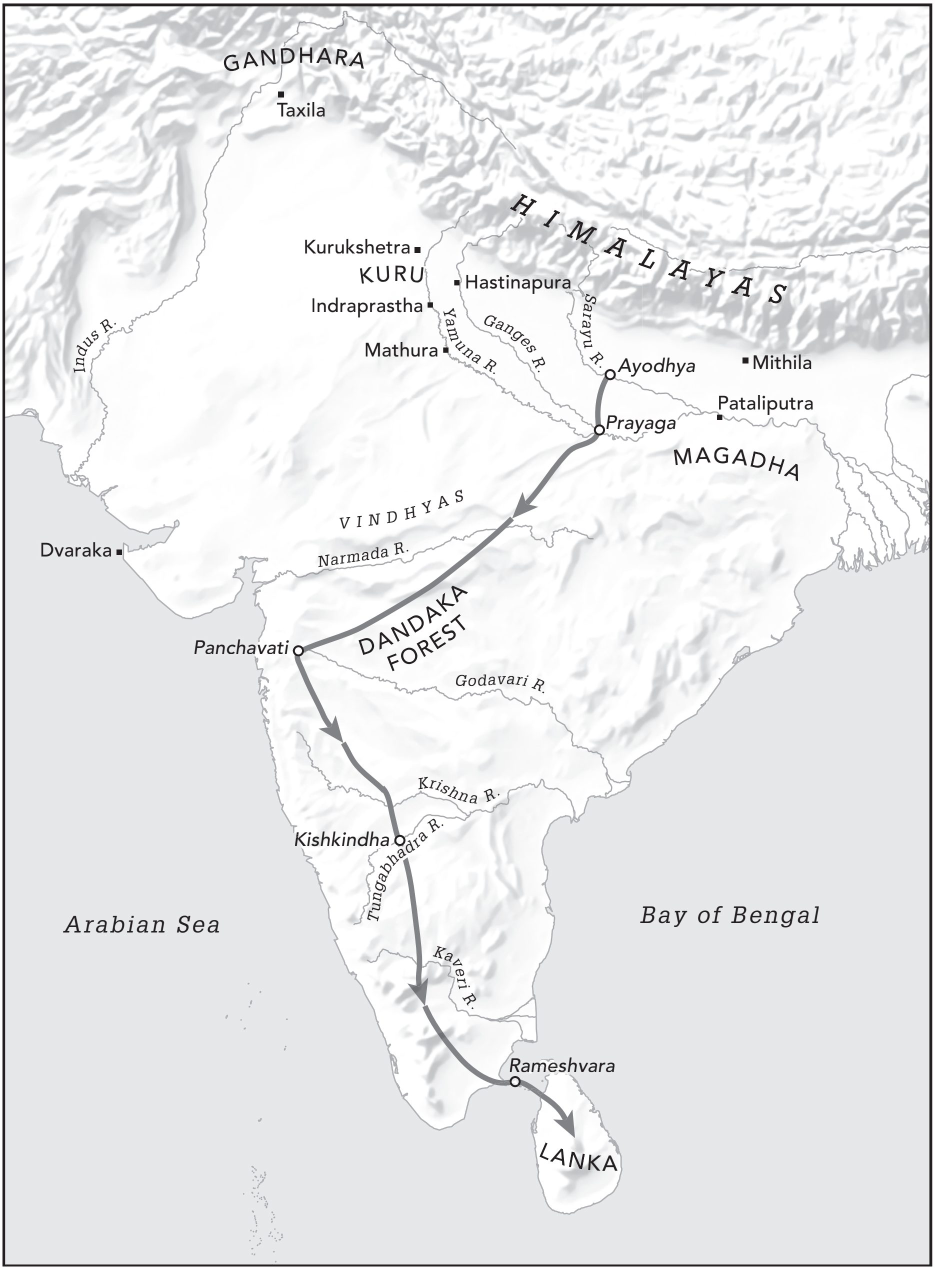
Previously, Dasharatha made two promises to his youngest and most beautiful wife, Kaikeyi. Now Kaikeyi forces him to make good on his word. The king must send Rama into exile for fourteen years and make one of Rama's younger brothers, the son of Kaikeyi, ruler in his stead. As in the *Mahabharata*, human fallibility interferes with the virtuous course of Dharma. But here Rama averts open conflict. He obediently submits to his father's promise. His wife Sita insists on joining him in exile; she views this as a fundamental tenet of her Dharma as a wife. His loyal brother Lakshmana also accompanies him. Dasharatha's expulsion of Rama from Ayodhya leads the threesome on an epic adventure far beyond the familiar world of Ayodhya and Indo-Aryan culture.

When Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana cross the Ganges River and head south, they enter a new and exotic world. Translator Sheldon Pollock likens it to Alice's falling down the rabbit hole into Wonderland. Valmiki's narrative takes the intrepid trio southward across the Vindhya mountains into the Deccan, where they spend over ten years in the Dandaka Forest, along the upper reaches of the Godavari River in present-day Maharashtra. Farther south, Rama and Lakshmana spend more time in Kishkindha, along the upper Krishna River in modern Karnataka. Finally, when Sita is abducted, they mount a military campaign all the way to Sri Lanka, off the southeastern tip of India (**Map 11**). As they venture farther from their homeland, they encounter not only the wolves, tigers, and other wild animals one might expect in the forest, but also stranger creatures like talking vultures, sociable monkeys, and shape-shifting demons. Valmiki portrays the territories south of the Gangetic plains as a realm of the fantastic. Rama's encounters there allow Valmiki and his audience to reflect on issues of Otherness and the limits of Dharma.

Indo-Aryan Homelands and Beyond

It is important to remind ourselves that the national boundaries of the modern world are not natural phenomena. They are the result of historical processes, often quite recent. The current borders of the South Asian nations owe their origins to British colonial rule of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, to the partition of British India in 1947, and to the Bangladeshi war of independence in 1971. Nor are these borders completely stable and universally accepted. Our modern nations do not correspond to the geographical conceptions held by earlier inhabitants of South Asia.

In the classical period, Buddhist, Smarta, and epic writers designated an area of central northern India, centered on the plains of the Ganges and Yamuna



MAP 11. Geography of the Sanskrit Epics

rivers, as "Aryavarta" (homeland of the Indo-Aryans) or "Madhyadesha" (the middle country). As the Dharmashastra of Manu defines it, "From the eastern sea [the Bay of Bengal] to the western sea [Arabian Sea], and between the two mountain ranges [the Himalayas and the Vindhyas], the wise ones call that land Aryavarta [home of the Indo-Aryans]" (MDhSh 2.22). They considered this large region to be a privileged zone of shared culture or civilization, which they identified with the adjective *arya*. In Smarta Brahmin works like Manu's treatise, the Aryavarta was a pure country where Brahmins could offer Vedic sacrifice and live according to their Dharma. "Where the black buck wanders of its own accord," continues Manu, "that land is considered suitable for sacrifice. Outside of that are the lands of the Others" (MDhSh 2.23).

Manu uses a common term here, *mleccha* (often translated as "barbarian" or "foreigner"), to refer to all those Others who live outside the Aryavarta and who do not share in the common social fabric of Indo-Aryan culture. Mleccha does not point to a particular social group or community, but rather can denote both "foreigners" from outside the subcontinent and also "tribals" or other indigenous communities within South Asia not incorporated into the prevailing Indo-Aryan cultural order. Greek and Roman Yavanas from the Mediterranean world are sometimes referred to as mlecchas, along with the various hunter-gatherer, pastoral, and agricultural groups that inhabited the uncultivated hills and the plowed river valleys of central or southern India. The term, as Aloka Parasher argues, is a pejorative one. Smarta Brahmin, Buddhist, and Jain writers of this period all show a "vehement belief in the superiority of themselves vis-à-vis mlecchas."[14] The distinction they make between arya and mleccha, writes Parasher, rests on three principal differences: language, area of habitation, and cultural behavior. It is not a matter of religious, ethnic, or racial difference.

Considerations of arya and mleccha had particular relevance in Mauryan and post-Mauryan India. Trade, political events, and external influence in all spheres of activity brought about a process of rapid change that disrupted many long-established patterns of authority. This was also a period of steady expansion in the reach of Indo-Aryan culture. The black buck, in Manu's metaphor for the lands of sacrificial purity, began to roam over larger portions of South Asia. As settlers from northern India began to spread into other parts of the subcontinent, they came into contact with other peoples, ranging from hunter-gatherer tribes of upland plateaus, to the trade colonies along the coasts and well-developed agriculture-based chieftainships along southern river valleys.

This expansion provoked lively debates over issues of cultural contact and hegemony. Could a mleccha become an arya? To what extent, and in what conditions, could others be incorporated into the Indo-Aryan social order? How much leeway exists in the notion of Dharma for the local customs of others? Do the principles of Dharma apply to outsiders? Some argued for an exclusionary position. Manu and other Dharmashastra authors urged their Smarta Brahmin audience to take an attitude of passive avoidance toward outsiders. Others like Valmiki took a more expansive and incorporative perspective. Although the *Ramayana* is an epic poem, not a factual travel account, Valmiki's story of Rama's adventures explores the very real questions of cultural contact and social incorporation faced in early India by those who called themselves Arya and those outside their social order. The epic offers an allegorical reflection on the expansionary "civilizing mission" of a north Indian cultural and political order as it spread historically beyond its center in the Gangetic plains.

Forest People in the Nearby Margins

As Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana depart southward from Ayodhya, they soon come to the Ganges River. Crossing the Ganges will be for them a symbolic passage from civilization into the forest. There they meet Guha, chieftain of a community of Nishadas living along the north bank of the river.

Nishadas appear at the margins throughout the epics. We have already met one, the huntsman who shoots the krauncha bird and earns Valmiki's curse. The term Nishada refers generally to hunter-gatherer communities living on the peripheries of Indo-Aryan society who maintain their own "tribal" social organization separate from the varna classification.[15] They govern themselves with chieftains or councils of male elders. They practice livelihoods like fishing and hunting, at which they often excel. As Guha says of himself, "I have wandered the forest all my life and nothing happens here without my knowing of it" (Ram 2.45.7). They are also known for their expertise with elephants. They domesticate the elephants of the forests and train them for heavy labor and battle.[16] Living near but not in Indo-Aryan society, these forest people (to adopt Ashoka's term) engage in trade and provide valuable resources and services to the more settled communities. Kings in particular depend on the nearby forest people. Their skills as hunters and elephant trainers make Nishadas valuable allies in times of war. The *Mahabharata* describes elephant corps led by Nishadas and other forest groups fighting at Kurukshetra.

This is Rama's first encounter during his exile. How should Kshatriyas relate to these outsiders? What are the principles of Dharma here?

An episode from the *Mahabharata* illustrates how easily things could go wrong between Nishadas and the warrior class. Ekalavya is the ambitious son of a Nishada chieftain.[17] He seeks to become a master in the art of archery. To pursue his vocation he applies to the best teacher available, namely Drona, the military instructor of the Kauravas and Pandavas at Hastinapura. But Drona, a proud Brahmin, declines Ekalavya's request on class grounds. He refuses to teach a lowly Nishada. Dejected but resolute, Ekalavya returns to the forest and fashions a clay image of Drona. Taking the Drona icon as his teacher, he practices with exquisite discipline and becomes a skilled bowman. One day the Pandava brothers are out hunting in the forest. One of their hunting dogs wanders off, comes upon Ekalavya as he is training, and barks relentlessly at the Nishada. Annoyed by the interference, Ekalavya deftly shoots seven arrows into the dog's mouth, like stitches sealing it shut. When their dog returns with the arrows protruding from its mouth, the Pandavas are astonished. Who could have shot seven arrows so quickly and accurately? They seek out the archer and ask where he has gained such skill. Ekalavya answers that Drona is his teacher.

Back at the capital, Arjuna complains bitterly to Drona. His teacher has promised to make him the foremost archer in the world. Has Drona been two-timing him? Has he elevated another—and a forest tribesman at that—to the same level of mastery? Drona goes out with Arjuna to meet the Nishada archer. Ekalavya immediately bows at the feet of Drona and declares himself the humble pupil of the guru. If you are my disciple, Drona replies coldly, then give me my teacher's tuition. Ekalavya immediately agrees to any payment Drona might request. Drona demands his right thumb. With a happy face Ekalavya unhesitatingly cuts it off and hands the severed digit to his teacher. Ekalavya will never again be so quick a shot, the narrator concludes, and Arjuna's jealousy and competitive anxiety are mollified. But Arjuna has also failed to gain a possible ally, and perhaps his jealousy has provoked antagonism. In the great battle at Kurukshetra, Ekalavya fights on the Kaurava side against Arjuna and the Pandavas. Later in the epic, during Yudhishthira's Horse Sacrifice, Arjuna must face Ekalavya's vengeful son in a fierce battle.

If this *Mahabharata* episode illustrates Kshatriya prickliness over any challenge from an outsider, Rama's encounter with Guha in the *Ramayana* demonstrates a more friendly, mutual, and Dharma-based model of interaction between Kshatriya elites and forest people at the margins. When Rama arrives at the river's edge, Guha quickly approaches and embraces him. He has food, drink, and a welcome-gift brought for the weary travelers. Guha may be chieftain of his tribe, but he immediately proclaims Rama's overlordship: "I bid you welcome, great-armed prince. This entire land belongs to you. We are servants, you the master. Come, our kingdom is yours to rule" (Ram 2.44.14). Guha's statement here is more than hospitable hyperbole, but less than a gift of direct sovereignty. Guha's Nishada tribe maintains its effective dominion within its riverbank territory, but it also recognizes the potential domination of a city-based kingdom like Ayodhya, and so Guha rhetorically places his own "kingdom" as subordinate within the broader overlordship of Rama's more powerful one. Rama is moved by Guha's show of affection and asks politely about the welfare of Guha's kingdom. He adds that he is now an ascetic and cannot accept all Guha's offerings. He will only take some fodder for the horses. Guha weeps when Lakshmana later explains the full situation of their exile, and he grieves for them "like an elephant afflicted by a raging fever" (Ram 2.45.24). Rama is both his master and his friend. In a society of hierarchies, friendship need not imply equality.

The following morning Rama asks Guha to fetch some sap from a banyan tree. He uses it to mat his hair and that of Lakshmana. The brothers have now taken another step in transforming themselves into ascetics. Guha provides a boat and oarsmen to ferry Rama and his party across the Ganges. At this moment of transition in Rama's life, as he moves from the settled kingdom of Ayodhya toward the uncharted lands to the south, his gracious interactions with the Nishada chieftain demonstrate his mastery of Dharma. Rama and Guha observe a mutually respectful hierarchy. Guha provides what services he can to the Kshatriya overlord, and Rama extends to the forest ruler a dignified consideration. Deeper in the forest, not all of Rama's interactions will unfold so smoothly.

Encounters beyond Aryavarta

Three categories of other beings that Rama encounters outside his homeland are of particular importance to the *Ramayana*: the Brahmin ascetics of Dandaka Forest, the *Rakshasas* (demons) who inhabit the forest and have their capital in Lanka, and the monkeys of Kishkindha.

In Dandaka Forest, human sages live in small clustered settlements called ashrams. They are forest dwellers, looking and living much as the Dharmasutra texts say they should. They wear clothes of bark and dwell in simple huts made of leaves. Members of the Brahmin class, they occupy themselves with the practices of reciting the Vedas and offering Vedic sacrifices. They all live in an austere manner, and many also perform voluntary acts of great austerity. Through their virtuous lives and rigorous practices they come to glow with Brahmin brilliance and they seek to generate ascetic power.

Living far from the settled kingdoms of northern India, the Brahmin forest dwellers of the Dandaka ashrams may have ascetic power, but they are nevertheless vulnerable. As Rama visits the hermitages, the sages repeatedly complain of attacks by Rakshasas, a class of "night-stalking" demons who disrupt their sacrificial rites and slaughter the sacrificers. They address Rama as a member of the warrior class, reminding him that a Kshatriya ruler is responsible for the protection of all those within his domain, and they appeal to him for help. Even though Rama is not technically king, and the sages do not live within the Ayodhya kingdom or even in Aryavarta, Rama agrees—against the foresighted warnings of his wife Sita—to extend his protection to the defenseless sages. For over ten years Rama and his companions travel from ashram to ashram in Dandaka Forest as guardians for the Brahmin sages. This brings him into inexorable conflict with the Rakshasas.

Valmiki's fictional narrative reflects a real historical pattern of this period. Small groups of Brahmins often did venture out beyond the areas of sedentary agriculture and settled kingdoms, acting as "pioneers into wild territory," as historian D. D. Kosambi puts it.[18] We might call it settler colonialism. They migrated as peaceful pioneers in small unarmed groups to establish ashrams for Vedic instruction and recitation. The uncultivated borderlands or forests were often inhabited by nomadic hunter-gatherer or pastoral groups that were not part of the Indo-Aryan social order. Kosambi suggests that the Brahmin settlers, like cultural missionaries, often interacted with these indigenous groups, both by introducing new practices such as plough-agriculture and by incorporating local rites or deities into their assimilative religious culture. But nothing guaranteed the interlopers would receive a warm welcome when they moved into territories already occupied by others. If threatened by indigenous inhabitants, these Brahmin missionaries might call for the protection of distant warriors or kings, which could lead to political incorporation of the territory into an existing kingdom. This is what is happening with the sages of Dandaka Forest and the exiled prince Rama. In the fictional world of the *Ramayana*, however, the creatures threatening the Brahmin pioneers are more powerful than mere human tribal folk.

The Rakshasas are a class of demons (*asuras*), beings with superhuman powers who are opposed to the Vedic gods (*devas*). They are described as *kamarupin*, that is, they can take on whatever physical form they wish, and in the story they often do. The Rakshasas first appear as aggressive opponents of the Brahmin ascetics who have set up ashrams in the hinterlands. They especially despise the Vedic sacrifices. The Rakshasas dump blood and raw meat onto the sacrificial fires and violently attack the sacrificers. An army of fourteen thousand Rakshasas has been deputed to Dandaka Forest specifically to harass the newcomers. Another important characteristic of the Rakshasas is their uninhibited sexuality. After Rama has defended the sages' ashrams, he is propositioned by a female Rakshasi, Shurpanakha. Rama rejects her sexual overtures, but Shurpanakha immediately shifts her attention to his brother Lakshmana. Less self-controlled than Rama, Lakshmana responds to the advances of the demoness by cutting off her ears and nose.

The first demons Rama encounters in the forest appear alone, as isolated rangers, but the Rakshasas also have an organized society and political system, with its capital in Lanka. Valmiki portrays Lanka as a glittering city full of towering luxurious mansions, every bit as magnificent as Ayodhya. There live the Rakshasa elite, "a class of beautiful and cultivated, if highly sensual, beings who live lives of luxury and indulgence," as translators Robert Goldman and Sally Sutherland Goldman put it.[19] Valmiki's depiction of Lanka complicates any superficial assumption that demons are unequivocally evil; in many ways Rakshasa society parallels that of the human Ayodhya. Like the Indo-Aryan society of Ayodhya, the Rakshasa society of Lanka is organized hierarchically, and its political system is a monarchy. The Rakshasa ruler Ravana maintains a harem of wives, just as Dasharatha does in Ayodhya (but unlike the determinedly monogamous Rama), and he also has a council of ministers with whom he consults on matters of state. Among the council members is Ravana's brother-in-law Vibhishana, a Rakshasa who recognizes the principles of Dharma and who consistently tries to direct his brother toward proper ethical policies. Ravana just as consistently ignores or overrules Vibhishana's sound advice. Ravana's statecraft is governed not by Dharma, but rather by his sexual desires, his arrogance, and his use of brute force to achieve his ends. When Shurpanakha returns, humiliated and mutilated, to Lanka, she complains to her brother Ravana about Rama's rebuke. Shrewdly, she also describes the great beauty of Rama's wife Sita. Ravana's vengefulness and his sexual acquisitiveness lead him to seize Sita by force and hold her captive in Lanka.

When Sita is abducted, the fortunes of Rama reach a low ebb. Deprived of kingship, exiled from home, and now bereft of his wife, Rama nearly goes mad. He and Lakshmana are reduced to wandering about the forest looking for signs that might tell them which direction Sita has been taken. A friendly vulture provides the first clue, and a helpful Rakshasa assists them further. Traveling farther south into the area around Lake Pampa, in modern-day Karnataka, they enter the monkey kingdom of Kishkindha. Meeting the monkeys marks a turning point in Rama's fortunes.

The monkeys (*vanara*) are forest-dwelling creatures with fur and tails. They can leap great distances and climb trees with great skill, just like the monkeys one finds throughout India today. However, in many other respects the monkeys of the *Ramayana* resemble humans. They have speech. One of them, Hanuman, is particularly known for his eloquent Sanskrit and his diplomatic skills. The monkeys wear clothes and ornaments. In another respect they are similar to the Rakshasas: they, too, are said to be *kamarupin*, capable of shifting shape.

The monkeys are also organized politically as a monarchy. The ruler of this monkey kingdom sits on a throne, with all the regalia of a human sovereign, in a splendid palace at the center of a magnificent capital city—though this capital, Kishkindha, is inside a mountain cave. Like Dasharatha and Ravana, the monkey king here maintains many wives in his women's quarters. He has a council of ministers, and Brahmin-monkey priests who perform the royal consecration and other public ceremonies. The monkey society of Kishkindha provides a mirror image of a human society. But it is a distorted reflection, as Rama soon discovers.

Unlike the Rakshasas, the monkeys do not harbor any particular hostility toward Brahmins or other humans. Rama forms an alliance with the Kishkindha monkey kingdom, and with its substantial assistance he locates Sita and ultimately defeats Ravana and the Rakshasa forces. In the end he recovers his wife. However, to gain the help of these monkey forces, Rama must first interfere in their political affairs, and his intervention is problematic.

Who were the Rakshasas? And who were the monkeys of Kishkindha, really? Many earlier scholars attempted to identify the Rakshasas and monkeys of the *Ramayana* as particular historical ethnic or religious groups. They identified the Rakshasas as various Dravidian and tribal groups of southern India, as the Buddhists of Sri Lanka, or even as Australian Aborigines. The monkeys were said to be specific tribal peoples of the Deccan highlands, some of whom, it was postulated, may have had monkey-like tails. The recent translators of Valmiki's epic have rightly criticized these overly literal efforts to turn the great poem into a narrative of real historical events. As Robert Goldman puts it, "We are convinced that attempts at an ethnological identification of the *rākṣasas* and the *vānaras* and the geographical location of their strongholds are not only futile but wrongheaded. For in seeking a historical basis for what is, in many respects, a kind of elaborate fairy tale, we are led away from a true understanding of the work."[20] However, a preemptive assignment of the epic to the fairy-tale realm of the imagination also, I believe, precludes a true understanding of a major aspect of the work.

Valmiki's *Ramayana* offers a serious reflection on political encounters with Others, in an allegorical mode. The Rakshasas and the monkeys of the *Ramayana* are not just objects of fantasy, they are also creatures in whose societies the protagonist intervenes. In both cases Rama evaluates individual leaders, forms alliances, uses violence to depose kings, and installs new rulers who owe loyalty to him as a patron. While not a direct transcription of reality, the epic does provide a fictional narrative for thinking about real historical encounters as Indo-Aryan culture spread beyond Aryavarta and as Indian kingdoms sought to incorporate new territories and the people living there. Valmiki is particularly concerned with the role of Dharma when dealing with social groups outside the Arya fold.

Interventions and Dharma

As an exile journeying beyond his homeland, Rama enters into Dandaka Forest, Kishkindha, and Lanka as new regions inhabited by other creatures. He interacts with those already there, and his actions change things. In the *Ramayana* Valmiki narrates Rama's interventions, and he also allows the characters to reflect on and discuss the ethics of these actions at considerable length.

Social transformations are already occurring before Rama arrives in Dandaka Forest. Brahmin ascetic groups have moved into the territory to establish ashrams for their Vedic practices. Rakshasa patrols, some under Ravana's command, are aggressively attacking these newcomers. Although the Rakshasas do not appear to claim the forest as part of their own settled dominion, they clearly resent the intrusion of the settlers from northern India. In the forest hermitages the Brahmins request Rama's protection from their assailants. By complying, Rama is assisting in the initial spread of Indo-Aryan cultural forms into a new region. This leads to further encounters with members of the Rakshasa royal family. After Lakshmana disfigures Shurpanakha and Rama decimates a troop of fourteen thousand Rakshasas, Ravana escalates the hostilities by abducting Rama's wife and imprisoning her in Lanka. This sets the stage for the central conflict of the epic, the confrontation of the exiled Ayodhya prince Rama, exemplar of the code of Dharma, and the demonic emperor of Lanka, Ravana, who is in many ways the antithesis of a Dharma-king. Before this struggle can play itself out, however, Rama must intervene in another community, the monkey kingdom of Kishkindha.

When Rama arrives in the Kishkindha region, searching for the trail of Sita, he does not immediately approach the ruler of the monkeys, Valin. Rather, he chances to meet Sugriva, the king's aggrieved younger brother, who is hiding out from Valin in a cave with a few retainers. Sugriva explains his situation to Rama. He had replaced his brother on the throne temporarily while Valin was fighting a demon inside a cave. He had erroneously assumed Valin was dead. When the older brother returned after defeating the demon, Valin treated Sugriva as a usurper. He forced Sugriva into exile and kept Sugriva's wife for himself. As one wifeless exile to another, Rama and Sugriva quickly strike up a friendship and reverently circumambulate a fire to solemnize their alliance.

The two allies are not exactly alike, however. Rama has gracefully acquiesced in his younger brother's assumption of the Ayodhya throne, while Sugriva is resentful toward his older brother and ambitious to regain kingship over Kishkindha. He asks Rama to assist him in a plan to defeat Valin. Observing the code of friendship, Rama agrees even before he knows the full story. Sugriva proposes to invite Valin to a fight. Knowing that Valin will accept this challenge, Sugriva asks Rama to hide nearby and to shoot Valin while the two monkeys struggle. Monkeys fight hand to hand or by swinging clubs; Rama possesses the more potent long-distance military technology of the bow and arrow. The monkeys wrestle ferociously, and just as Valin is about to subdue Sugriva, Rama shoots his deadly arrow. Valin does not expire directly. In the past he has received a special life-extending necklace from the god Indra, and this gift now allows him the opportunity to reproach Rama for intervening in monkey affairs. The dialogue of dying Valin and victorious Rama occupies two substantial chapters in Valmiki's narrative, and it addresses key questions about the universality of Dharma and the relations of humans and monkey societies.

Valin begins by contrasting Rama's reputation for virtue with his ignoble conduct here. Warriors both human and monkey accept that it is unfair to shoot someone from a hidden position. Further, Valin questions the reasons for Rama's involvement in the monkey kingdom. He has not harmed Rama or his kingdom, and since monkeys are forest-dwelling creatures who subsist on roots and nuts, they do not threaten human settlements. The monkeys, Valin suggests, are not aggressors here, and so there is no call for retribution. And since Rama does not eat monkey meat or wear monkey fur, he cannot justify his slaughter of Valin in the terms humans normally use to rationalize hunting other forest animals. From Valin's point of view, both Rama's intervention and his tactics contradict his stature as an exemplar of Dharma.

Rama responds by chastising Valin. The monkey, he asserts, does not understand Dharma. First of all, the earth itself belongs to his dynasty, he claims, and he was simply acting on behalf of the current ruler in Ayodhya, his brother

Bharata. After this overarching claim to imperial dominion, Rama observes that Valin has not followed the "path of kings." By living with Sugriva's wife, says Rama, Valin has departed from Dharma, and this transgression warrants Rama's punishment. Furthermore, Rama defends his own conduct by his alliance. He had promised Sugriva his help, and he always keeps his word. Dharma requires that one assist one's friends and that one's words remain truthful. Finally, Rama points out that humans do trap and shoot animals by stealth, and, after all, Valin is only a monkey. In the end there is a hierarchical division between humans and monkeys. At this point Valin admits that he is a lowly creature, and he accepts Rama's assertions. Rama consoles the dying monkey and tells him that he has now returned to Dharma.

If the *Ramayana* is treated as an allegorical text, how should we view this deathbed dialogue? Through the voice of Valin, Valmiki raises cautionary issues that question the propriety of Rama's conduct here. We might side with the usurped Valin. But the force of Valmiki's narrative supports Rama's position. By claiming sovereignty far beyond the ordinary boundaries of Ayodhya or Aryavarta, Rama argues that it is legitimate for Indo-Aryan warriors to intervene in other communities. The principles of Dharma are universal, he suggests. They apply even to monkeys. This implies that other communities can become part of the Indo-Aryan cultural order. However, monkeys like Valin are inferior beings whose understanding of Dharma is imperfect, and so it is proper that they occupy a subordinate role in the social hierarchy. As Kosambi and many other historians have observed, this was a common pattern of cultural assimilation by which outside groups became part of the Indic system of classes and monarchical states. "The chief, with the backing of a few nobles freed from tribal law," writes Kosambi, "would become ruler over his former tribe while the ordinary tribesman merged into the new peasantry."[21]

Pragmatically Rama gains a valuable ally through his actions. When Valin expires, Rama immediately has his friend Sugriva crowned king of Kishkindha. Monkeys are capricious and pleasure-loving creatures, and at first Sugriva seems to be an imperfect supporter. While Rama wants the monkeys to conduct searches for his missing wife, Sugriva enjoys the pleasures of court life. Finally Rama must send Lakshmana to threaten the monkey ruler into action. But once roused, the monkeys prove to be formidable helpers. The alliance with the monkeys proves to be absolutely crucial to Rama's larger campaign against the Rakshasas.

There is no ambiguity in the case of the Rakshasas. In Valmiki's telling, Ravana's abduction of Sita clearly warrants Rama's retributive attack on Lanka. Here, too, Rama finds an ally among the Rakshasa royal family. As Rama and his monkey troops make camp on the shore near Lanka island, Ravana holds court among his advisers in the Rakshasa capital. Ravana's brother Vibhishana, who often speaks up for the values of Dharma within the Rakshasa court, repeatedly urges the ruler to return Sita and avoid a war that is sure to be cataclysmic. Harshly rebuked by Ravana, Vibhishana flees Lanka and seeks refuge in Rama's camp. His arrival prompts a lengthy debate among the monkey leadership about his intentions. Some suspect that he is a Rakshasa spy. But the monkey diplomat Hanuman correctly discerns that Vibhishana has heard about Rama's support for Sugriva, another disinherited younger brother, and he has come seeking both asylum and a kingdom. Rama receives Vibhishana in friendship. Even before the attack on Lanka, Rama has Vibhishana ceremonially consecrated king of the Rakshasas, as a symbolic indication of his intention. In the course of battle, Vibhishana's knowledge of Rakshasa weapons and tactics proves invaluable to Rama's cause. When the Rakshasa army is decimated and Ravana is finally slain on the battlefield, Rama commands that his ally Vibhishana be crowned king of Lanka as soon as possible. Here, again, Rama has deposed the sitting ruler and installed on the throne a younger member of the royal family who owes loyalty to him.

In the contrasting examples of the monkeys and the Rakshasas, Rama's actions illustrate two types of intervention. With the monkeys he is able to effect a relatively peaceful coup d'etat and enlist them as warriors in his own campaign. With the Rakshasas, by contrast, nothing less than a fierce war can succeed in bringing this kingdom into submission. However, in both cases the result is assimilation and alliance under the overlordship of Ayodhya. After his victory over Ravana and his recovery of Sita, Rama returns to Ayodhya and, finally, after his fourteen-year absence, he assumes the throne. During the ceremonies of installation, Rama's closest attendants are his three brothers and his two new allies, the rulers of Kishkindha and Lanka. Sugriva and Vibhishana hold the yak-tail fly-whisks that betoken their fealty to their overlord Rama. The formerly independent kingdoms of the monkeys and the Rakshasas are now subordinate parts of the Ayodhya empire ruled by Rama. Valmiki's story of Rama's journey into southern India begins as a tale of fantastic adventure but ends as a narrative of imperial integration.

Vishnu's Divine Empire

When Rama and his allies have finally defeated the Rakshasas, and Rama himself has slain their leader Ravana, Sita rejoins her husband. The reunion starts off disastrously. While Sita is overjoyed to see him, Rama treats her with cold cruelty. He tells her that he has protected his own reputation by rescuing her, but her virtue is now in doubt. She has spent the last year in Ravana's palace. What respectable husband would take back a woman who has lived in the home of another male? He no longer loves her, he announces, and cruelly suggests that she should go wherever she wishes—perhaps to live with Sugriva and the monkeys or with the new Rakshasa ruler Vibhishana. Deeply wounded, Sita accuses Rama of addressing her "as a common man might speak to his common wife" (Ram 6.104.5). She insists that, even though she could not control where her body was taken, her heart has been devoted to Rama at every moment. Weeping, she orders Lakshmana to build her a funeral pyre. "As my heart has never once strayed from Rama," she prays, "so may the fire-god Agni, witness of the world, protect me on all sides" (Ram 6.104.24). She enters the blazing fire.

Just as Sita steps into the flames, amid a deafening cry of woe, the gods arrive on their flying chariots. It is the cohort of thirty Vedic gods, with Brahman in the lead. Brahman immediately berates Rama. How could you allow Sita to immolate herself, as some ordinary man might do? Don't you know who you are? Confused, Rama asks for clarification: "I do consider myself just a man, named Rama, son of Dasharatha. Please tell me, Lord. Who am I? Who do I belong to? Why am I here?" (Ram 6.105.10) He has spent his life thinking of himself as human.

Brahman begins to explain to Rama his divine nature. "You are a god, the mighty lord Narayana, who holds the discus" (Ram 6.105.12). But Rama is not just any god, like the thirty Vedic gods hovering nearby. Rather, he is the Supreme Being, the highest governing principal of all the worlds. And he is Vishnu, who has entered a human body to carry out the crucial task of slaying Ravana.

In explaining Rama's identity to Rama, Brahman sets out a new theology of encompassing divinity. As the new Supreme, Vishnu-Rama is identical with the previous formulations of the Highest Being. He is the Purusha of the *Rig Veda*, the Prajapati of the Brahmanas, and even the imperishable *brahman* of the Upanishads. He is the underlying author of Indra's great deeds. Other gods are like the hairs on his capacious divine body. He is the sacrifice, the sacred sound OM, and the Vedas. Applying the lexicon of the Absolute, Brahman tells Rama that he is the original, the all-pervading, the unknowable, and the support of all the worlds. But in contrast to the Upanishadic *brahman*, Vishnu also acts directly in the world. Brahman refers to some of the awesome deeds he has carried out. Once he was a giant boar who saved the earth from sinking. Another time the spanned the three worlds with three great steps and confined the demon Bali.

Even more directly, Vishnu may take on human bodies to intervene in human affairs. He is Krishna, Brahman tells Rama, referring to the divine protagonist in the events told in the *Mahabharata*. And here, now, he is Rama, son of Dasharatha, Vishnu incarnated to carry out a specific task.

Brahman's theological résumé may come as a surprise to Rama, but not to those who have been listening to Valmiki's narration. The poet makes clear throughout the story that Rama is no ordinary mortal. There is something special, divine, in him. That Rama does not comprehend his own full nature is part of the design of the plot. Ravana had received a special boon that he could not be defeated by any god, but he arrogantly neglected to include human opponents in his list of invulnerabilities. Only through a kind of incarnated amnesia, by which Rama truly thinks of himself as "just a man," can Vishnu-as-Rama sidestep the provision of Ravana's boon. Now, with Ravana conquered, it is time to inform Rama of his full divine nature.

Brahman's revelation here highlights an important and consequential religious agenda of the Sanskrit epics. Not only does he offer a way for Rama to understand his own identity and the significance of his actions. Brahman also provides a new way for the audience of the epics to comprehend the identity of the old Vedic god Vishnu.

The *Rig Veda* briefly mentions Vishnu as a wide-ranging god who accompanies Indra. But he is a relatively minor figure in the Vedic pantheon. In the Brahmana interpretive literature, his role grows. His three steps come to be closely associated with sacrifice, and the three strides in a royal consecration mark a close connection between Vishnu and kingship. By Shunga times, we see early material evidence of an emerging Bhagavata religious community in the form of the Heliodorus pillar. Other divine figures with their own legacies are drawn in by the force field of this growing religious formulation. Step by step Vishnu rises in status, and the Sanskrit epics begin to flesh out the full dimensions of this newly crowned High God. In the epics, Vishnu is both an Absolute Supreme Deity with inconceivable transcendent qualities and an interventionist god who becomes manifest or incarnate in various living forms, whether zoomorphic or anthropomorphic. Vishnu maintains an active interest in the preservation of the virtuous world order. And Vishnu supports Dharma-kingship, whether by infusing his energy into a consecrated king, as Bhishma tells Yudhishthira, or by reigning in full glory, as the incarnate form of Rama.[22]

Once Brahman has explained this to Rama, the fire god Agni brings Sita out of the fire unharmed and proclaims her complete innocence. Rama now claims to have known this all along. He only needed to instigate a public display of Sita's purity. The great god Maheshvara reminds Rama that he still has duties to complete. He must return to Ayodhya, assume kingship there, reward his allies, and perform royal sacrifices such as the Horse Sacrifice. The victory party flies back north, where righteous Rama rules the kingdom for ten thousand years. During this glorious time, as Valmiki describes it:

> Everyone was happy and everyone was intent on Dharma. Following the lead of Rama, they were not violent toward one another. The trees with their spreading branches were always in flower and always bearing fruit. The rain god brought timely showers and the wind had a gentle touch. While Rama ruled, the people all carried out their own proper work and they were satisfied with just their own duties. Intent on Dharma, they were never untruthful. (Ram 6.116.86, 88–89)

Rama's millennial reign in Ayodhya, like Yudhishthira's postwar kingship in Hastinapura, stood as paradigms, imagined empires of the Hindus. Here, the epic storytellers assure their audiences, the people led good lives in well-ordered societies, ruled by proper Kshatriya kings. These utopias, set in a reconstructed past, also offer a project for the future.

Rama Stories as Long as Rivers Flow

When Brahman makes his promise of poetic longevity to Valmiki, he actually makes two predictions. He speaks of "the story of Rama's deeds" and "the story of Rama that you have composed." These are not the same thing. Valmiki is the named author responsible for the Sanskrit epic *Ramayana*, but that is by no means the only telling of Rama's deeds that has "circulated among people." There have, in fact, been innumerable tellings and retellings of this story. Scholars refer to this larger corpus of stories and versions as "Rama-*katha*," the Rama story in its multiplicity of versions.[23] Already in classical times numerous versions of Rama's deeds circulated. In the *Mahabharata* the sage Markandeya tells the story of Rama to Yudhishthira during the Pandavas' forest exile.[24] Both Buddhist and Jain traditions preserve early alternative tellings of the Rama story. Markandeya's brief version remains within the same sphere of values as Valmiki's much lengthier one, but not so those of the Buddhists and Jains.

The "Dasharatha Jataka" is one of the many stories the Buddha Shakyamuni tells of his previous births. In those earlier lives, the future Buddha practiced the virtues that would eventually lead him to enlightenment in this lifetime.[25] Once, the Buddha explains, he was born as Rama, son of Dasharatha. King Dasharatha ruled in Varanasi, and with his chief queen he had three children, Rama, Lakshmana, and Sita. When the queen died, Dasharatha married a new queen, who gave birth to a son, Bharata. The new queen fervently wished to make her own son king, and so Dasharatha urged the three children of the deceased queen to go into exile for their own safety. They settled in an ashram in the Himalayas. Dasharatha died nine years later. The courtiers refused the queen's demands that Bharata be made king. Bharata then went off to find Rama. When Bharata told Rama of his father's death, Rama did not express sorrow or weep, the Buddha recounts, because emotion had been extinguished from his mind. Bharata was amazed by Rama's equanimity, and Rama responded by reciting ten verses on impermanence. These stanzas enabled the other children to overcome their grief. Rama eventually returned to Varanasi and ruled for sixteen thousand years, with his sister Sita as his queen.

In this brief Buddhist telling of Rama's story, there is no demonic Ravana and no war on Lanka. The battleground is an internal one, and the demons are the emotional states of mind that disturb tranquility and bring about suffering. The focus shifts to one dramatic moment, when Rama and his companions must face the reality of their father's death. In this past life as Rama, the Buddha demonstrates the Buddhist virtue of equanimity, and he teaches his siblings about impermanence and the inevitability of death. In Valmiki's version, by contrast, when Bharata tells Rama of his father's demise, Rama loses consciousness, falls to the earth, weeps copiously, and laments. Clearly, by Buddhist standards, Valmiki's Rama has not yet risen above his feelings of attachment that lead to suffering.

The earliest preserved Rama story of the Jains, Vimalasuri's *Paumacariya* (the deeds of Padma, a.k.a Rama), dates to the third or early fourth century CE.[26] This lengthy work is an explicit counter-epic (*prati-purana*), composed with knowledge of an earlier version and designed to offer an alternative to it. At the onset, King Shrenika of Magadha finds himself troubled by many of the improbable and inconsistent features of the prevailing stories of Rama's deeds. How could the powerful Rakshasas be defeated by mere monkeys, he wonders. Can it be that the Rakshasas really drank blood and ate flesh? Is it the case that the supposedly virtuous Rama killed a golden deer in the forest and then treacherously shot Valin just to oblige his friend Sugriva? Confused by these and other problems in the story, Shrenika asks the Jain Tirthankara Mahavira for clarification. Mahavira retells the story, from a Jain point of view, to remove the implausible elements of Valmiki's version, to revise several important points in the story, and to enforce key Jain values like nonviolence.

First of all, Rama is no god. He is a virtuous human being working toward his own liberation. Nor is Ravana a demon. He is a handsome and just ruler who protects the Jain shrines in his kingdom. But he has a human flaw, a weakness for the beautiful Sita. This lust, Gautama explains, is the result of past karma, and ultimately it leads to his death. It is not Rama who kills Ravana, since he adheres to a code of strict nonviolence. Lakshmana kills Ravana and frees Sita, and eventually he goes to hell for his act of violence. Sita does not have to submit to a fire-ordeal, as in Valmiki's telling, but here she renounces the world and becomes a Jain nun. Rama eventually gains Jain enlightenment.

From an early time the river of Rama stories flowed outward from northern India into new regions, throughout South Asia and then beyond into all parts of Asia. New tellers told the stories in new languages and adapted the story to new cultural settings. The new audiences found the tale endlessly compelling. According to Santosh Desai, the travels of the Rama-katha began in the early centuries CE and followed three main routes out of India:

> By land, the northern route took the story from the Punjab and Kashmir into China, Tibet, and East Turkestan; by sea, the southern route carried the story from Gujarat and South India into Java, Sumatra, and Malaya; and again by land, the eastern route delivered the story from Bengal into Burma, Thailand, and Laos. Vietnam and Cambodia obtained their stories partly from Java and partly from India via the eastern route.[27]

In all its diverse cultural settings, the story of Rama took on new themes, emphases, and agendas. Nor was the story of Rama ever limited to literary compositions. Rama's story has been enacted in dance-dramas, projected onto shadow-puppet screens, carved and painted in visual representation, and sung in oral folk-poems. In modern times, the mass media of film and television broadcast the Rama story, beginning with Dadasaheb Phalke's 1917 film *Lanka Dahan* (the burning of Lanka). The Rama story certainly reached an apogee of mass audience in the enormously popular seventy-eight-episode *Ramayan* television spectacle. Directed by Ramanand Sagar, the series aired on the Indian national television network in 1987–88. As Philip Lutgendorf notes, this series was the most popular program ever shown on Indian television, "a phenomenon of such proportions that intellectuals and policymakers struggled to come to terms with its significance."[28]

Often these compositions have been used to reinforce the status of monarchs and the values of dominant elites, as Valmiki's *Ramayana* did. Many critics suggested that the television *Ramayan* contributed significantly to the rise of Hindu nationalist politics.[29] But like Vimalasuri's Jain counter-epic, the story may well be reoriented to favor alternative values or to present a different religious perspective. Other versions may articulate the voices or visions of excluded or silenced groups. In a study of South India women's songs that focus much more on the plight of Sita than the heroic deeds of Rama, V. Narayana Rao observes, "The *Rāmāyaṇa* in India is not just a story with a variety of retellings; it is a language with which a host of statements may be made."[30]

9

The Kushana Era and Pan-Asian Buddhism (0 CE–300 CE)

THE TALL STONE FIGURE HAS lost his head and arms, but there is no mistaking the power and determination in this male's pose (**Fig. 23**). Standing six feet high on two pillar-like legs spread apart, he wears oversize felt boots that splay out to the left and right. His patterned tunic is covered by a long open coat of heavy material that reaches below his knees. It is the cold-weather dress of a horse-riding cavalryman. His right hand rests on a long sturdy mace pressed to the ground between his feet, while his left hand grips the hilt of a broadsword. Along the lower part of his coat and tunic are inscribed his royal titles and his name: "The Great King, King of Kings, Son of God, Kanishka."[1]

Standing in his current home in the Government Museum, Mathura, this Great King Kanishka may appear as an intruder among the peaceful Jain saints and the meditating Buddhas in their gossamer-like robes. We can picture the Central Asian warrior jumping off his horse in the middle of this religious gathering to assert his authority over it. In fact, King Kanishka did preside over the religious efflorescence of second-century Mathura and the busy workshops that produced many of the remarkable stone sculptures in the museum.

Kanishka was ruler of the Kushana dynasty, the most powerful and extensive India-based polity of the first three centuries CE. As Kanishka's clothing suggests, the Kushanas were not originally from India, and their empire was not located solely in the South Asian subcontinent. Kanishka's ancestors belonged to a group of nomadic pastoralists. They had migrated from the steppe lands of western China by way of Central Asia before establishing themselves in the region of Bactria, in modern-day Afghanistan. From there they expanded their rule into the subcontinent. During Kanishka's reign, from 127 to 153 CE, the Kushana empire extended over an immense area, from the Amu Darya (Oxus River) in the

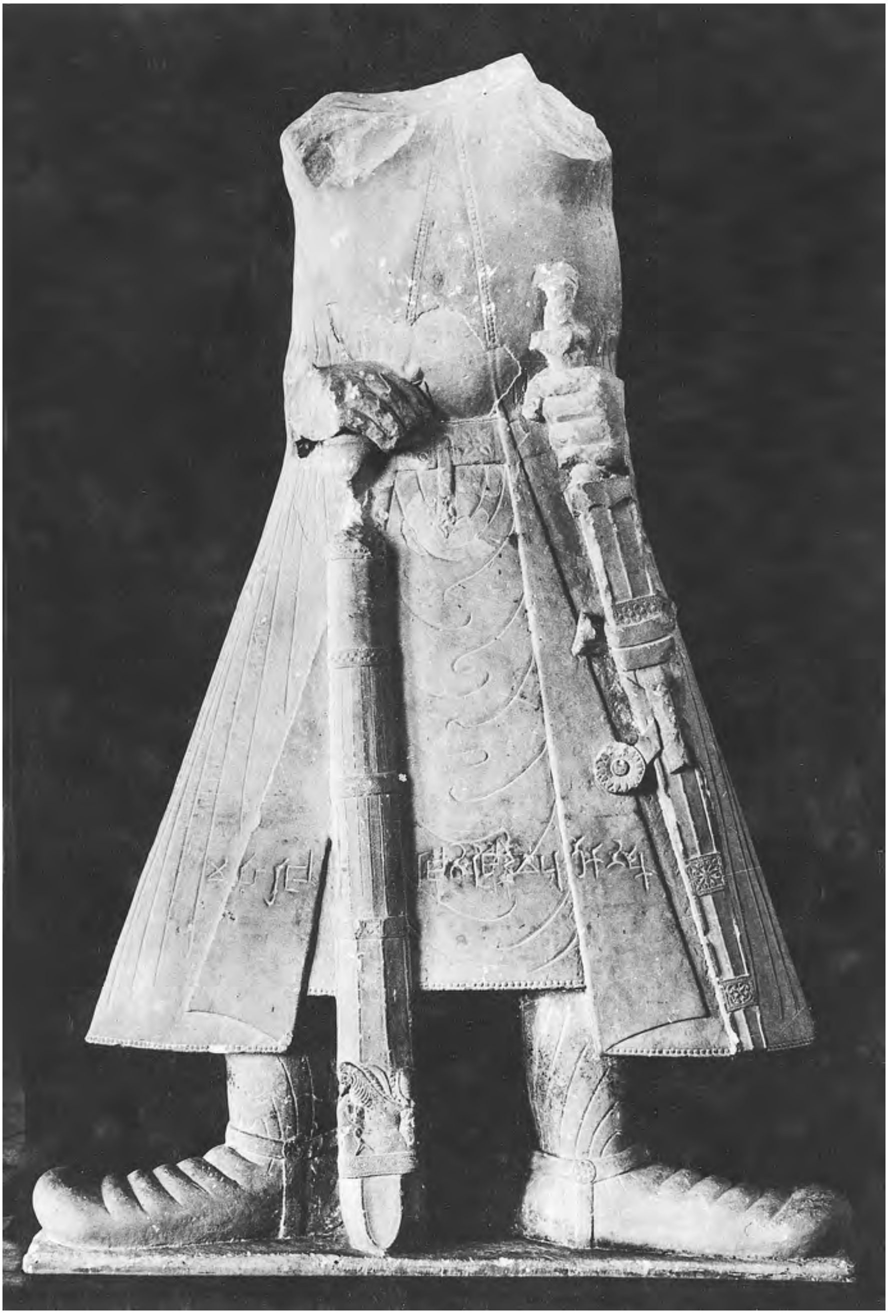
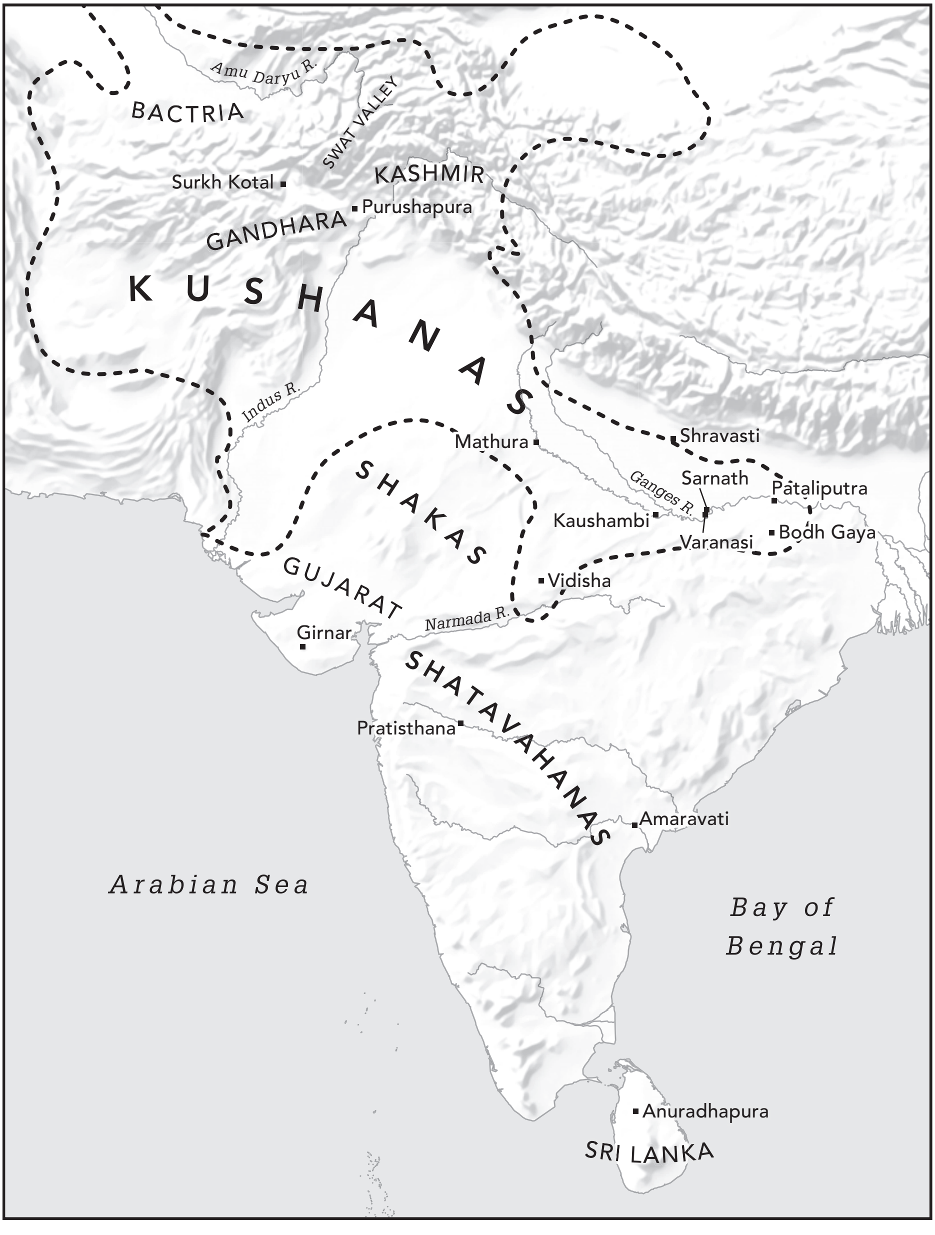


FIGURE 23. Kanishka Portrait, red sandstone, from Mat, Mathura, 150 CE. Archaeological Museum, Mathura, Uttar Pradesh. Photo courtesy of the Center for Art and Archaeology of the American Institute of Indian Studies.

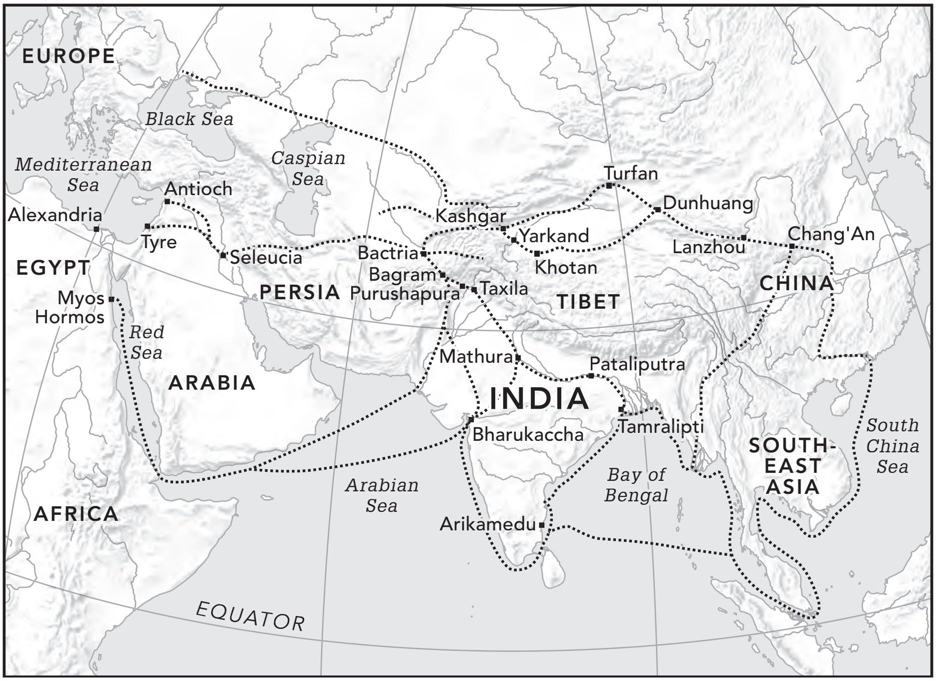
northwest to the Tarim Basin in the northeast, and from the mouth of the Indus River in the southwest to the Ganges plains in the southeast, as far as the old Mauryan capital of Pataliputra.[2] The Kushanas presided over an area that encompassed the modern nations of Afghanistan, northern Pakistan, and northern India, and their authority also reached into territories now lying in Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and western China (**Map 12**).

In the first two and a half centuries CE, the Kushana empire lay at the crossroads of the Eurasian world, which was becoming more interconnected than ever before. The *ecumene*, or the "known world" in Greek, stretched from the Roman empire in the west to the Han China empire in the far east. Two large stable polities—the Kushana and the Parthian (covering much of present-day Iran and Iraq)—ruled much of the land in between those two great imperial formations. During this period of political stability, trade across Eurasia increased enormously. Overland caravan routes, often called the Silk Roads (for one of the favored commodities), stretched from China through Kushana and Parthian territories to the Mediterranean. Just as important were maritime routes that carried cargo from the Mediterranean down the Red Sea, across the Arabian Sea, to coastal South Asia, and from there through Southeast Asia and up the South China Sea coast to China. Luxury items made long journeys. As I. C. Glover, a historian of Southeast Asia, suggests, it is apt to call this vast interconnected trade network linking imperial states from east to west the first appearance of a "World System" (**Map 13**).[3]

Transporting the luxury items, people moved along these routes, and with them so did less tangible things. Ideas, philosophies, and religions circulated widely. In the Indian sphere this stimulated new dialogues and innovations in religious thought and practice. Of course, those never-ending debates continued: What is the good life and how does one live it? What is the highest goal and how does one attain it? What does a good society look like? What is the role of the king in bringing about order and affluence? What roles do gods play in human life? How should humans best interact with those gods? But there were also important innovations in religious practice, as we will see. Even the refined Sanskrit language of the Vedic tradition was reframed and redirected to new political and aesthetic purposes. During this period, the Buddhist community continued to expand its presence across the South Asian landscape and beyond. Buddhism spread northward along the Silk Roads into Central Asia and China, and southward through southern India and Sri Lanka and subsequently into Southeast Asia, becoming a genuinely pan-Asian religious order. Kanishka himself, the Central Asian horseman, presided over the dramatic spread of Buddhism.



MAP 12. India in the Kushana Era



MAP 13. Eurasian Trade Routes in the Early Centuries CE

The Kushana Empire and the First World-System

Kanishka may have had himself designated as a great "King of Kings, Son of God" in northern India, but his roots lay in Central Asia. His forebears belonged to a tribal confederation of nomadic pastoralists, the Yuezhi. The peregrinations of the Yuezhi from Central Asia to Mathura on the Yamuna River reflect the mobility and cultural interactions of this period.

The Yuezhi tribes originated in the Caucasus region.[4] They spoke a language of the Indo-European family. Like many other nomadic groups who spoke Indo-European languages, they migrated out from the Caucasus sometime over the period between 3400–1800 BCE. Around the time the Indo-Aryan people of the *Rig Veda* began to settle in northwestern India, the Yuezhi had moved into the steppe lands on the western borders of China. Another tribal group, the Xiangnu, also occupied this region.

The Yuezhi were nomadic pastoralists who traveled with cattle, sheep, and horses. The domesticated horse enabled the Yuezhi to control large territories, to raid more sedentary agricultural communities, and even to threaten powerful polities like the Chinese. The Yuezhi and the Xiangnu, with their fast-moving horse-riding archers, formed potent militarized nomadic confederations that posed a threat to the Chinese rulers. In the second century BCE, Chinese emissary and historian Sima Qian described Xiangnu culture.

> They move about in search of water and pasture and have no walled cities or fixed dwellings, nor do they engage in any kind of agriculture . . . It is their custom to herd their flocks in times of peace and make their living by hunting, but in periods of crisis they take up arms and go off on plundering and marauding expeditions. This seems to be their inborn nature . . . If the battle is going well for them they will advance, but if not, they will retreat, for they do not consider it a disgrace to run away. Their only concern is self-advantage, and they know nothing of propriety or righteousness.[5]

As China expanded its territorial control under the Qin and Han dynasties, it came into conflict with the nomadic confederations on its western borders. This set off a kind of domino effect among the various nomadic groups occupying Central Asia. In 166 BCE the Xiangnu attacked the Yuezhi and forced them out of the region. The Yuezhi traveled some 1,200 miles west and settled in the area of modern Kazakhstan for several decades. But around 133 BCE the Xiangnu attacked again and forced the Yuezhi into another migration, this time to the Amu Darya river area. There they came into conflict with another nomadic group, the Shakas or Scythians. The Yuezhi defeated the Shakas, forcing them to migrate into Bactria, and subsequently into the Indian subcontinent, where the Shakas established several kingdoms. The Yuezhi subsequently gained control over the wealthy province of Bactria, in modern Afghanistan.

From the time of Alexander's campaigns around 320 BCE, Bactria had retained a significant Greek presence. Under the Seleucids and then several Indo-Greek kings, the region had flourished with an economy based on sedentary agriculture and trade. The Shakas defeated local Greek rulers in 140 BCE, but Greek urban culture continued, and Bactria maintained its position as a trading center. So when they drove out the Shaka rulers, the Yuezhi nomadic pastoralists now found themselves ruling over an established urban society with a cosmopolitan Greek legacy.

The first Kushana king, Kujala Kadphises, united five dispersed Yuezhi princedoms under his sole authority and then carried out a series of expansionary campaigns across the Hindu Kush mountain range, into the Kabul Valley, then farther into the Swat Valley and Kashmir. His successors, Vima Takhtu (r. 85–100 CE) and Vima Kadphises (r. 100–126 CE), continued the Kushana expansion into northeast India. Finally, Kanishka extended the Kushana territories as far as Pataliputra, the old Mauryan capital. In the mid-second century, the Kushana empire claimed lordship over a vast territory that stretched from the Amu Darya to the eastern Ganges. But it was not a highly centralized imperial state, and it encompassed within it a great variety of local and regional religious cultures.

The Kushana state also enjoyed a crucial intermediary position in the growing overland trade routes stretching from China to the Mediterranean, commonly known as the Silk Roads. The "First Silk Roads Era," as Craig Benjamin terms the period of 100 BCE to 250 CE, was one of the most transformative periods in ancient world history. "After tens of thousands of years of small-scale regional interactions, it was during the First Silk Roads Era that millions of humans dwelling in diverse communities across a vast expanse of geographical space were connected in an exchange network so dynamic and diverse that, in retrospect, it now seems to be the quintessential example of an ancient globalization."[6] This dramatic development in global connectedness was made possible by four stable imperial formations: Rome in the west, China in the east, and the Parthian and Kushana states in between. With their control of key posts along the east-west silk routes, and the links into northern Indian trade routes, the Kushanas ensured the smooth flow of goods, and profited from it greatly.

Dynastic Arts and Religions of the Kushanas

Not much is known about Yuezhi culture or religion during the earliest period of their migrations. As nomadic pastoralists, they traveled light and left behind only limited traces in the historical record, usually when they came to the notice of recordkeeping civilizations like the Chinese. But as kings of kings in regions from Bactria to the Gangetic plains, the Kushana rulers, from Kujala Kadphises on, began to create a significant material record. In large royal statues and small coins, they had themselves represented as they wished to be seen, and through their public works they displayed the religious orientation of their dynasty.

The powerful standing image of Kanishka was excavated from Mat, a site near the city of Mathura. Statues of other Kushana rulers were also found there, including an even larger image of Vima Kadphises.[7] Vima sits on a lion throne, and like Kanishka he is dressed in the Central Asian horseman style, with high boots and a tunic-like garment. These statues were housed in a large rectangular structure that functioned as a kind of dynastic sanctuary, a ceremonial shrine for the rulers themselves. A similar royal shrine was constructed in Surkh Kotal in Afghanistan, the other political center of the Kushana dynasty. The purpose of these sanctuaries is not certain, but the iconographical choices of the rulers are clear. The Kushana rulers retained their traditional clothing even after they had settled in South Asia. They portrayed themselves as warriors from outside India who now exercised royal authority within their new territories, from Afghanistan to the Yamuna River.

Vima Kadphises reformed the coinage within the Kushana territory and began issuing gold and copper coins. From then on Kushana coins circulated widely throughout the empire. Since coinage is largely a prerogative of the state, the coins of a dynasty like the Kushanas can serve as a "vehicle of royal propaganda, a direct expression of the ideology of the ruling house," as John Rosenfield observes.[8] Kushana coins consistently depict the ruler on one side (since they were "kings of kings"), and a deity on the other (since they were also the "sons of god"). To take two among hundreds of examples, the gold coin of Kanishka now in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art depicts the king standing and facing left (**Fig. 24**). He wears a heavy coat similar to the one in his Mathura statue, and he has a full beard. With his right hand he reaches forward to make a sacrificial offering at a low altar. In his left hand he holds a spear. A brief inscription, in Bactrian language using Greek script, reads, "Kanishka, the Kushana, the king of kings." On the obverse side of a coin issued by his successor Vasudeva is an image of the Indic deity Shiva (**Fig. 25**). The god wears a dhoti and in his hands he holds a noose and a trident, while his bull-mount stands behind.[9]

If the Kushana rulers styled themselves as the "sons of god," they were ecumenical in who that god might be. According to Rosenfield's count, thirty-three different deities appear on the coins of the Kushana rulers Kanishka and Huvishka. Perhaps it would be better to translate the compound *devaputra* as "son of gods," plural. These deities come from multiple religious cultures. Some derived from the Hellenistic world and the Roman empire to the west, such as Herakles and Helios. Others like Ahura Mazda and Mithra originated in the Persian cultural region and were associated with the powerful Achaemenid empire of centuries past. There were gods who came from India, like Shiva and the war god Skanda. Kanishka also issued coins with the Buddha Shakyamuni as a god. Ruling a large empire that encompassed varied religious cultures,

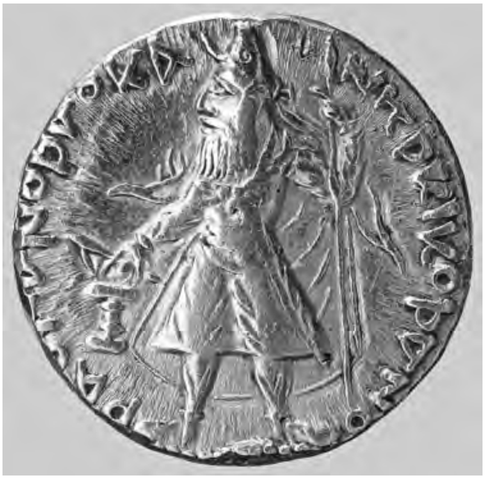


FIGURE 24. Coin of Kanishka, gold, Gandhara, Pakistan, ca. 130 CE. Bequest of Joseph H. Durkee, 1898. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (99.35.3024).

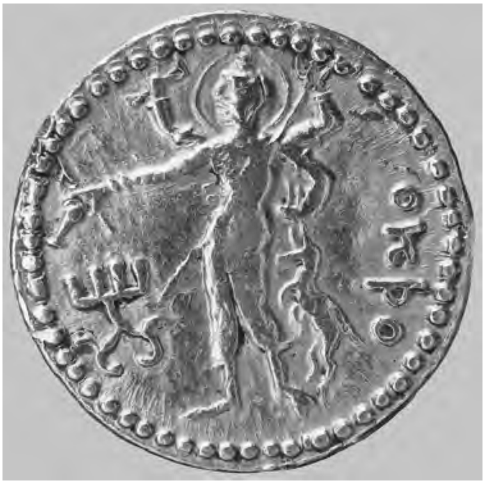


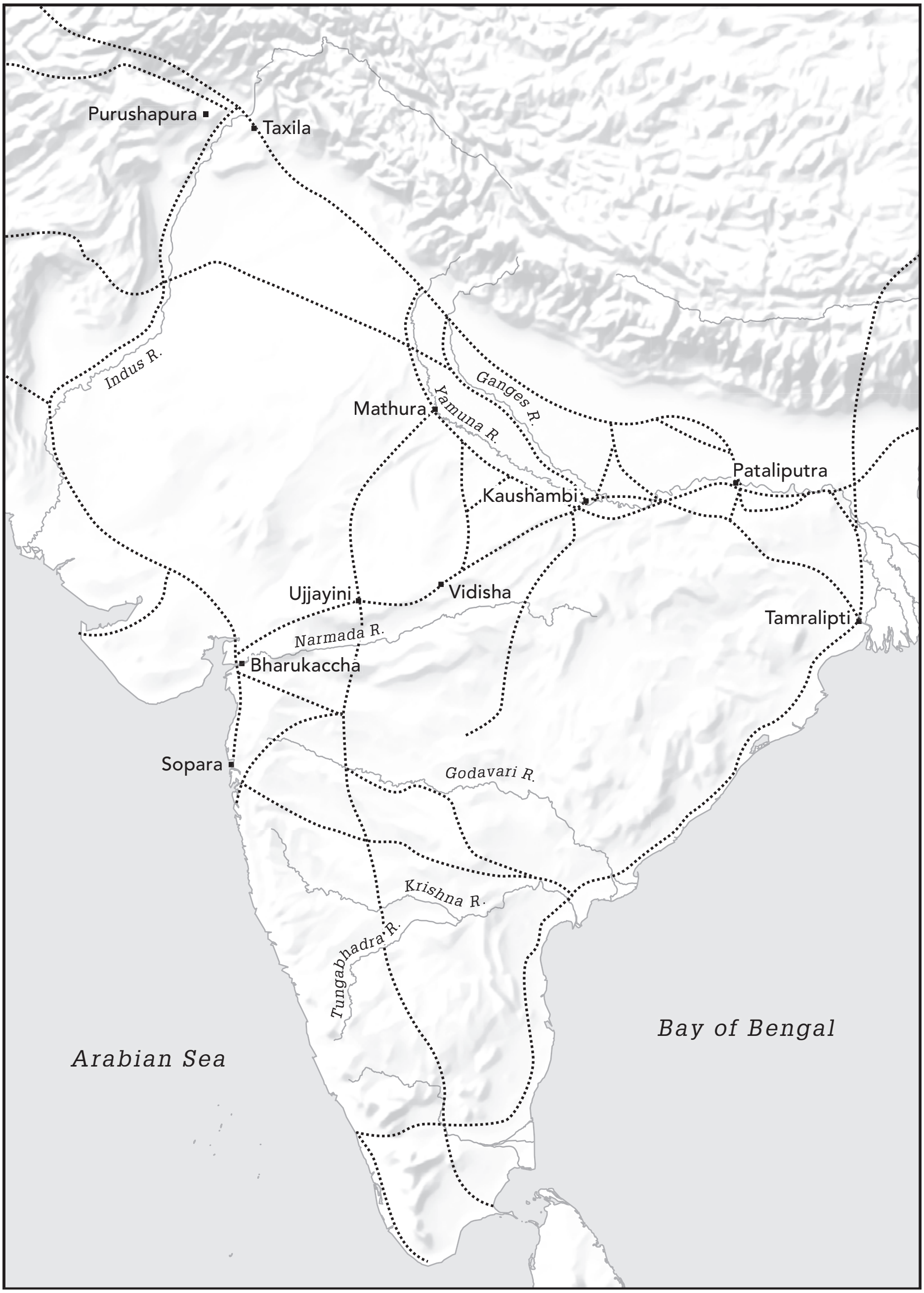
FIGURE 25. Coin of Vasudeva, gold, Gandhara, Pakistan, 185–220 CE. Bequest of Joseph H. Durkee, 1898. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (99.35.3023).

the Kushanas incorporated their deities into the royal coinage. Rosenfield interprets this eclectic assembly of gods as reflecting the Kushana "concern with material abundance and prosperity, with military triumph, with the legitimacy of rule, and with the divine sanction and support of the ruling house."[10] The Kushana rulers were certainly concerned with these matters, but one can also see in their coins an audacious appropriation of gods from other kingdoms and empires throughout the known world, past and present, to forge a new synthetic imperial order.

Anthropologist A. M. Hocart long ago suggested a distinction in forms of kingship between "polytheistic" and "monotheistic" rulers. Polytheistic kings are ones "who include in their divinity the divinities of their chieftains," while monotheistic kings "are one indivisible and only god, and whose chieftains consequently cannot be different gods, but only dimmer reflections of the same god as their king."[11] The Kushanas clearly followed the inclusive policy of Hocart's polytheistic king. They accepted the multiple divine beings worshipped by the many religious cultures within their domains and, in a sense, absorbed them all into their own royal authority.

The pluralistic religious policy of the Kushanas can be seen on the ground, in the archeological landscape of Mathura, one of their capitals. Located on the Yamuna River at a northwestern entry point to the Gangetic plains, Mathura had already become, by Mauryan times, an important center of trade and was at the intersection of several long-distance trade routes (**Map 14**). Numerous industries and crafts developed in the Mathura area, including pottery, textiles, metalwork, and sculptural work in stone and other materials. By the start of the Common Era, Mathura was a prosperous cosmopolitan urban center. Under the Kushanas it flourished also as a political seat of power, and religious institutions of all sorts proliferated.[12] Worship of earthly deities like Yakshas and Yakshis continued, and a new shrine for the prominent Naga lord Dadhikarna was established. The growing religious community around the synthesizing deity Vishnu, who increasingly incorporated other divine beings like Narayana and Krishna Vasudeva, was also very active in Mathura. There is evidence for groups focused on the god Shiva and on the sun god Surya. Goddesses we identify as Durga and Lakshmi attracted devotees. The Jains had a large monastic establishment and stupa, known from excavations at Kankali Tila. The abundant archeological remains, then, show clearly that a multiplicity of religious cultures shared the urban landscape of the Indian capital in Kanishka's time. (We will return in the next chapter to consider the icons produced in Mathura during this period and their significance for the history of early Indian religions.)

Later Buddhist tradition, however, portrays Kanishka as an active and committed supporter of Buddhist institutions, a "second Ashoka." This is at most only partially true. There is no evidence that Kanishka shared Ashoka's intense personal interest in Buddhist ethical teachings. Nor is there any explicit inscriptional evidence of royal patronage of Buddhist sites by Kanishka, as there is for Ashoka. The Buddhist community flourished in Kushana times, but so, evidently, did



MAP 14. South Asian Trade Routes in the Early Centuries CE

other religious groups. There is one intriguing site, however, that may well point to Kanishka's elevation of Buddhism as the primary imperial faith.

In the Gandharan Kushana center of Purushapura (modern Peshawar, Pakistan), later Chinese Buddhist pilgrims were astonished by a towering stupa, over four hundred cubits in height, supposed to have been built by Kanishka. Visiting in the early fifth century, Faxian reported, "Of all the topes [stupas] and temples which the travelers saw in their journeyings, there was not one comparable to this in solemn beauty and majestic grandeur. There is a current saying that this is the finest tope in Jambudvipa."[13] In the early twentieth century, British archeologist D. B. Spooner excavated the foundation of this massive structure. The square base measured 285 feet from side to side. Spooner also found a small metal casket containing relics buried at the center of the monument. An inscription indicates that the box was embedded in the stupa at the time of its construction, during the reign of Kanishka.[14]

What happened to the superstructure that Faxian saw, we cannot say. But we can envision how it might have appeared from Gandharan mini-stupas of the same period. These are small votive stupas that mirror larger stupas in miniature. In one example, now in the Indian Museum, Kolkata, the square base serves as foundation for the rounded stupa form that rises in several stages (**Fig. 26**). The harmika atop the hemispherical dome has five rising stages, each larger than the last, and rising still higher atop the center are seven parasols. Narrative sculpture on the base depicts the life of the Buddha Shakyamuni, and each rising level of the stupa contains further decorative embellishment. By Kushana times the Buddhist stupa had risen into a distinctive new form in the Gandharan region. Ascending from the earthly horizontal burial mounds, stupas could now be vertical towers lifting toward the heavens. Ashoka may have been responsible, according to legend, for spreading eighty-four thousand stupas throughout his empire. Kanishka's great stupa at Purushapura may have represented his own elevation of Buddhism in the northern capital of the Kushana empire.[15]

Beginnings of the Sanskrit Cosmopolis

On the night of 16 November 150 CE, a fierce storm raged in from the Arabian Sea onto the shores of Gujarat. The rain clouds pouring out their waters, it was reported, made it appear as if the earth had been turned into one big ocean.[16] In the path of the storm's destructive floods was a man-made reservoir called Lake Good-Looking (Sudarshana). The lake had been excavated several centuries before, by order of the Mauryan rulers Chandragupta and Ashoka. Even though

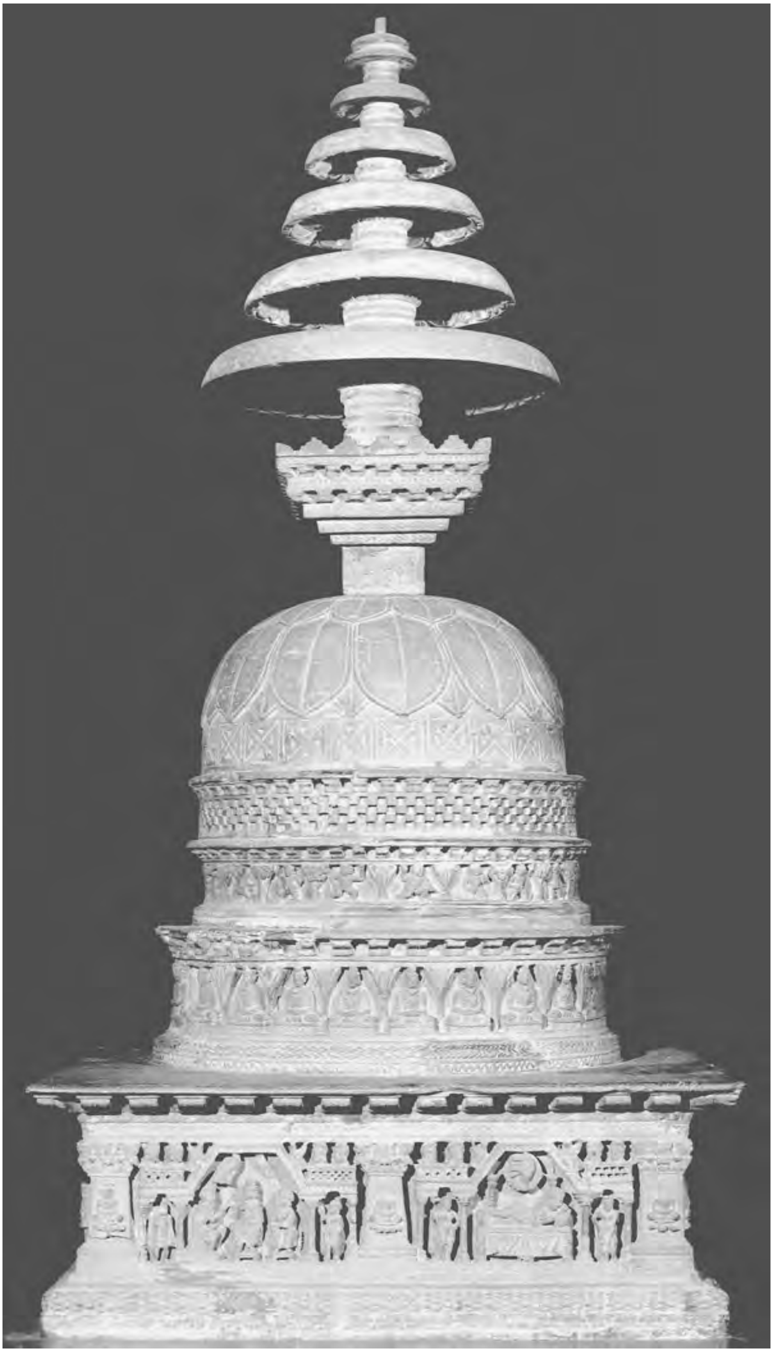


FIGURE 26. Votive Stupa, Swat District, Pakistan, ca. mid-1st to mid-3rd century CE. Indian Museum, Kolkata. Photo by John C. Huntington. Courtesy of the John C. and Susan L. Huntington Photographic Archive of Buddhist and Asian Art.

the reservoir had been solidly constructed, the rushing torrents brought stones, trees, shrubs, and other debris in their wake and leveled the dam. All the water escaped, and the desiccated bed of the reservoir became Lake Bad-Looking (Durdarshana). The local ruler Rudradaman, a regional king of Shaka affiliation, undertook a project to restore the lake to its former glory. In fact, he made the dam three times as strong as it had been, so the reservoir could now be called Lake Super-Good-Looking (Sudarshanatara). To celebrate his good deed, Rudradaman had a twenty-line inscription engraved on a large granite boulder located nearby.

It was normal for a ruler in classical India to carry out such public works. Ashoka Maurya spoke of planting trees, digging wells, and constructing rest houses along the roads of the kingdom, and he noted that previous kings had also done so. And it was not that unusual to have one's royal benevolence inscribed in some permanent fashion. On the very same large stone surface used by Rudradaman, Ashoka had etched fourteen of his own royal proclamations long before. What made Rudradaman's action unprecedented was that he had this inscription composed in high Sanskrit. He had himself praised in a format of Sanskrit composition that would come to be called *prashasti* (royal "glorification"). As Sheldon Pollock puts it, "For the first time, self-consciously expressive Sanskrit, with all its enormous authority, power, and cultural value governed by the very fact of its centuries-long monopolization and ritualism, was used in a public space, in bold letters, for all to see, for the self-presentation of a living overlord."[17] Rudradaman was a pioneer in deploying Sanskrit to glorify a political ruler.

Glorification of Kings

The eulogy or glorification of the king, written in Sanskrit and etched into a permanent substance like stone or copper, became an important genre of literary composition as well as political rhetoric. These public-facing prashastis present the king as benefactor or ruling authority in some benevolent action, such as a grant to a worthy religious recipient or, as here, the rehabilitation of a valuable water source. They portray the king as he wishes to be seen. They describe his valor and his accomplishments on the battlefield, his defeat of other rulers and his acquisition of new territories. Often they provide a genealogy of the ruling line. Historians have studied these accounts of military exploits and lineages to help reconstruct a dynastic history of India. But the primary intent of prashastis is not documentary; they are meant to establish the fame (*kirti*) of the king as a just, successful, and powerful ruler. And royal fame is envisioned, Daud Ali suggests, as a kind of substance: "a bright, white, spotless light, like the moon, 'covering the world' like a canopy and spreading beyond the oceans."[18] A prashasti offers an ideal portrait of a charismatic Dharma-king.

The eulogy of Rudradaman praises his personal qualities and his accomplishments. From birth, it claims, he has been endowed with "royal splendor" (*raja-lakshmi*). Raja-Lakshmi is personified as a goddess who both infuses the male king with potency and reflects the charisma of the one to whom she attaches herself. Rudradaman is handsome, of good complexion, strong, and virile. He is a warrior who has trained in the arts of battle, which include fighting using horses, elephants, chariots, and hand-to-hand combat with sword and shield. But he has also studied such disciplines of knowledge as grammar, music, and logic. In fact, as the Sanskrit eulogy states, Rudradaman is himself a poet: "skilled in literary composition (*kavya*) in both prose and verse that is clear, pleasing, sweet, and charming, rendered beautiful by its correct grammar and ornamented with figures of speech." The king's own mastery of Sanskrit is an important aspect of his royal qualifications.

As a ruler, Rudradaman pursues a dual policy of external expansion and internal orderly affluence. The prashasti lists the territories that Rudradaman has acquired through his valor and brought to order. In those places, "the cities, towns, and countrysides are no longer threatened by robbers, snakes, wild animals, diseases, or other afflictions." He generously grants protection to opponents who submit willingly, but he destroys those like the powerful Yaudheyas who arrogantly refuse to accept his overlordship. Within his own dominion, the state treasury overflows with gold, silver, and jewels rightfully obtained through tribute, tolls, and taxes. From this royal wealth he is munificent in supporting worthy recipients such as cows and Brahmins. All four classes have taken refuge with Rudradaman and endorsed him as king for their own protection. Simply by raising his hand, the eulogy proclaims, Rudradaman has gained the firm attachment of Dharma.

By rehabilitating the Mauryan-built reservoir and by etching his prashasti onto the same rockface used by Ashoka, the Shaka ruler Rudradaman clearly wished to affiliate himself with that illustrious imperial dynasty of centuries past. (Three centuries after Rudradaman, the Gupta ruler Skandagupta would use the same rock for his own laudatory prashasti.) Both Ashoka and Rudradaman seek to assert their restoration and expansion of Dharma, but their notions of Dharma-kingship are not exactly the same. Ashoka speaks in the first person in his proclamations, as a committed Buddhist lay follower, and his tenets of Dharma draw upon Buddhist lay ethics. Rudradaman's prashasti describes him in the third person, as an exemplar of a Dharma-king modeled most closely on the epic hero Rama. Yet there is no claim here to divine kingship, as there is in the *Ramayana*, and Rudradaman's prashasti does not indicate any clear religious orientation. Ashoka used Prakrit dialects suited to the localities for his inscribed proclamations; Rudradaman had his glorification composed in literary Sanskrit, the "perfected language."

The Sanskrit prashasti of Rudradaman, carefully carved onto the Junagadh granite boulder in 151 CE, stands at or near the beginning of a phenomenon Sheldon Pollock calls the "Sanskrit cosmopolis." This is a "transregional cultural formation," Pollock argues, by which Sanskrit became "the premiere instrument of political expression in the polities that comprised it, those of most of South and much of Southeast Asia."[19] The first manifestations of this cultural formation appear under the rule of the Shakas and Kushanas, in the first two centuries CE. From northwestern India, Sanskrit spread as a public political language throughout the subcontinent, and by the fifth century CE it also extended its reach into Southeast Asia, as far as Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia.

Many scholars have viewed Rudradaman's use of Sanskrit as an effort to "legitimate" himself and to emphasize the "Indianization" of a "non-Indian" ruler. But up to this time Sanskrit had been largely restricted to the liturgical concerns of Vedic and Smarta Brahmins. Rudradaman makes no effort in his prashasti to ground his rule in the Vedas. There is no mention of any Vedic royal consecration or Horse Sacrifice, and only the most cursory reference to "cows and Brahmins." The Shakas did not ally themselves with the old Vedic order, nor did the Kushanas. Pollock suggests that this is a "desacralization" of Sanskrit. Rudradaman lifted the perfected language out of the domain of its Vedic religious culture and freed it for a new use as "an instrument of cultural-political power."[20] From Rudradaman's time on, kings in South and Southeast Asia would convey their authority using the Sanskrit language. Desacralization, however, may not be the best term. As the Sanskrit language was decoupled from its Vedic boundaries, it could also become the linguistic medium for multiple religious cultures. Despecialization of Sanskrit is more apt. This is most striking in the case of the Buddhists.

As we have seen, the early Buddhists firmly rejected Veda-style chanting and insisted on using local languages. This fit with the proselytizing orientation of the Buddha's message and their critique of the Vedic order. Some Buddhist schools stuck closely to this language preference. The Theravada school that became prominent in Sri Lanka and in much of Southeast Asia maintained their sacred works in Pali, a vernacular offshoot of Sanskrit. However, in the Kushana Era other Buddhist communities and poets began to adopt Sanskrit as a suitable, even superior, means of conveying the Buddha's teachings. The Sarvastivada school, which flourished in the northwest regions of the subcontinent under Kushana rule, began to compose their massive canon of Buddhist works in Sanskrit. (The Sarvastivada was the major mainstream school of Buddhism transmitted to East Asia.) In the Kushana Era, new Buddhist texts conveying the teachings known as Mahayana regularly used Sanskrit. And at the Kushana court, Ashvaghosha's *Buddhacharita* retold the life of the Buddha Shakyamuni in elegant Sanskrit verse.

Epic Life of the Buddha Shakyamuni

Ashvaghosha was raised as a Brahmin in Ayodhya and evidently received an excellent education in Vedic knowledge. As an adult he converted to Buddhism under the tutelage of Parshva, a monk affiliated with the Sarvastivada school. He became an esteemed poet in the Kushana court of Kanishka, and there he composed a poetic life story of the Buddha Shakyamuni in elegant Sanskrit verse, as well as several other Sanskrit works extolling Buddhism. His *Buddhacharita* was the first Sanskrit courtly epic (*mahakavya*). Along with the prashasti or royal panegyric, the courtly epic would be a key part of elite culture in the Sanskrit cosmopolis.

In the *Buddhacharita* Ashvaghosha acknowledges his debt to Valmiki as creator of the first Sanskrit verse-poem. He is clearly inspired by Valmiki's epic narration of Rama's life, and in many ways his own composition emulates and expands on the poetic qualities of literary Sanskrit first explored in the *Ramayana*. In telling the life story of the Buddha as another kind of epic, however, Ashvaghosha also develops a series of thematic contrasts. The Buddha's attainments, he argues, went beyond even the great accomplishments of heroic Rama. The Dharma he sought and achieved, according to Ashvaghosha, was a Dharma superior to that of Rama the Dharma-king.

The earliest Buddhist canonical literature had placed greater emphasis on the Buddha's teachings of Dharma and his organizing of the Sangha than on the person of the Buddha. But as the community of the Buddha's followers grew in Mauryan and post-Mauryan times, so did an interest in maintaining his personal presence and in exploring his life story in all its aspects. The proliferation of stupas and their enclosed bodily relics celebrated the Buddha's continuing expanding hereness. In the collections of Jataka ("birth") tales, Buddhist storytellers related his hundreds of past lives in which the future-Buddha, or Bodhisattva, had practiced the foundational virtues that would enable him finally to attain enlightenment in this final lifetime as Shakyamuni. And in the oral accounts of Buddhist teachings, new elaborations of the Buddha's biography highlighted the personal sources of his teachings and extolled his supernormal capacities as ways to convey the Buddha's compelling message. By the mid-second century CE, Ashvaghosha had a rich oral body of material to draw upon as he crafted the story of the Buddha's life into a dramatic Sanskrit epic of renunciation, determined effort, and victorious enlightenment.[21]

Sarvartha Siddha, the future Buddha Shakyamuni, is born in Kapilavastu to a royal family, according to the *Buddhacharita*. His father, Shuddhodana, is a virtuous ruler of the Shakyas who "adheres to the varied code of Dharma followed by good people and preserved in the Vedic texts" (BCh 2.54). The kingdom is one of orderly affluence where "Dharma blazes forth," since all the people follow their proper duties (BCh 2.16). All is well, until the court Brahmins predict that Shuddhodana's newborn son will become either a world-conquering king or an awakened sage. Anxious to maintain continuity of rule, the king decides he must ensure that his son will take the path of kingship, not that of renunciation. He has the young prince brought up in the midst of continual pleasure and happiness. He seeks to bind him to *kama*, sensual desire and pleasure. He arranges for his son's marriage to Yashodhara, a woman of great beauty and good conduct. In this doomed effort at royal succession, Shuddhodana guards his son against Dharma by letting him loose among sensual pleasures. But there is a higher Dharma than this worldly Dharma of king and kingdom, Ashvaghosha argues. He calls it *sad-dharma*, True Dharma, and it is inevitable that the prince will seek out this superior Dharma.

Despite Shuddhodana's best efforts, it is inevitable that Shakyamuni will eventually come into contact with suffering (*duhkha*). Ashvaghosha dramatizes this is in a series of encounters. The prince and his entourage take several pleasure outings from the palace. In anticipation, the king has the roads swept of any sight that could possibly alarm the sensitive insulated young man. But the gods intervene. They create apparitions that deeply alarm the prince: an old man, a diseased person, and a corpse. If vulnerability, pain, and transience are inevitable parts of life, Shakyamuni reflects, how is it possible to enjoy a life of pleasures? "I cannot find peace or contentment, let alone enjoyment. The world appears to me like it is burning up in fire" (BCh 4.98). As he broods on these matters, he encounters a Shramana (or rather, a divine apparition of one), and his path is set. Though his father insists that the prince's duty is to observe the Dharma proper to his householder stage of life, Shakyamuni resolves that he must instead seek an imperishable Dharma. If one is trying to escape from a burning house, he tells his father, one does not wait until the proper stage of life to do so. Again assisted by helpful gods, the prince leaves his palace confinement at night and enters the forest. If the first part of his life was one of pampered luxury, Shakyamuni soon pursues its antithesis, extreme asceticism. He quickly arrives at an ashram of forest-dwelling Brahmin sages and their wives.

In narrating the Buddha's life, Ashvaghosha develops a series of contrasting parallels with Valmiki's story of Rama. Both Rama and Shakyamuni go into forest exile—but Rama is forced to leave by court intrigue while Shakyamuni escapes his father's palace willingly. Both quickly find their way to forest ashrams. As a Kshatriya prince, Rama vows to protect the Brahmin sages; as a neophyte renouncer, Shakyamuni seeks to learn from them. In the ashram, the ascetics follow the austere way of life outlined in Smarta Brahmin works for forest dwellers. They maintain their sacrificial fires and chant Vedic mantras. They severely restrict their diet. Some take the "deer-vow," subsisting only by grazing on grass. By following this rigorous code of Dharma, one Brahmin explains to Shakyamuni, they hope to gain rebirth in heaven. Shakyamuni is not impressed by the path of voluntary physical pain. Further, he considers their pursuit of heaven a decidedly secondary goal. His aim, he explains to them, is to become altogether free from rebirth. If that is the case, an older Brahmin advises him, he should seek out another teacher, a famous sage named Arada who has attained greater spiritual insight.

Meanwhile back in Kapilavastu, news of Shakyamuni's escape reaches his wife Yashodhara. Like the Sanskrit epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, the *Buddhacharita* is primarily a story of heroic male effort and accomplishment. Like the epic narrators, Ashvaghosha also opens a small window for female characters to articulate their own views of Dharma and to lament the consequences of male actions for their own lives. In the *Ramayana*, Sita insists on accompanying her husband into forest exile. It is her Dharma as a wife, she argues forcefully, to share her husband's fate. In the *Buddhacharita*, Shakyamuni's secretive flight has deprived his wife Yashodhara of that option. Bereft and angry, she views herself as his "partner in Dharma." "Does he not see," she asks, "that both husband and wife are initiated and consecrated by Vedic rites during sacrifices? And that both equally enjoy their ritual benefits in this life and the next one?" (BCh 8.63) In abandoning her, Shakyamuni has selfishly taken away Yashodhara's opportunity to fulfill her role as a royal wife, sharing as a couple in the everyday Vedic practices of the household and in the more public *shrauta* sacrifices that they would have performed as king and queen.

Shakyamuni's quest takes him first to the ashram of Arada, and then to another sage, Udraka. Their understanding and methods, however, prove to be insufficient to Shakyamuni's aspiration.[22] He takes up a yogi's solitary life on the banks of the Nairanjana River, where he is soon joined by five other mendicants. With them he undertakes fierce austerities for six years. His daily diet shrinks to one jujube fruit, one sesame seed, and one grain of rice. Eventually he comes again to recognize that this practice of bodily self-harm does not lead to transformation. Since extreme mortification only detracts from the ability to concentrate, he decides to partake of a proper meal. Thus strengthened, he begins the culminating meditation that leads to his enlightenment. In Ashvaghosha's narration, Shakyamuni has himself experienced and then rejected both extremes of self-indulgence and self-mortification, giving personal force to his proclamation of a Middle Way.

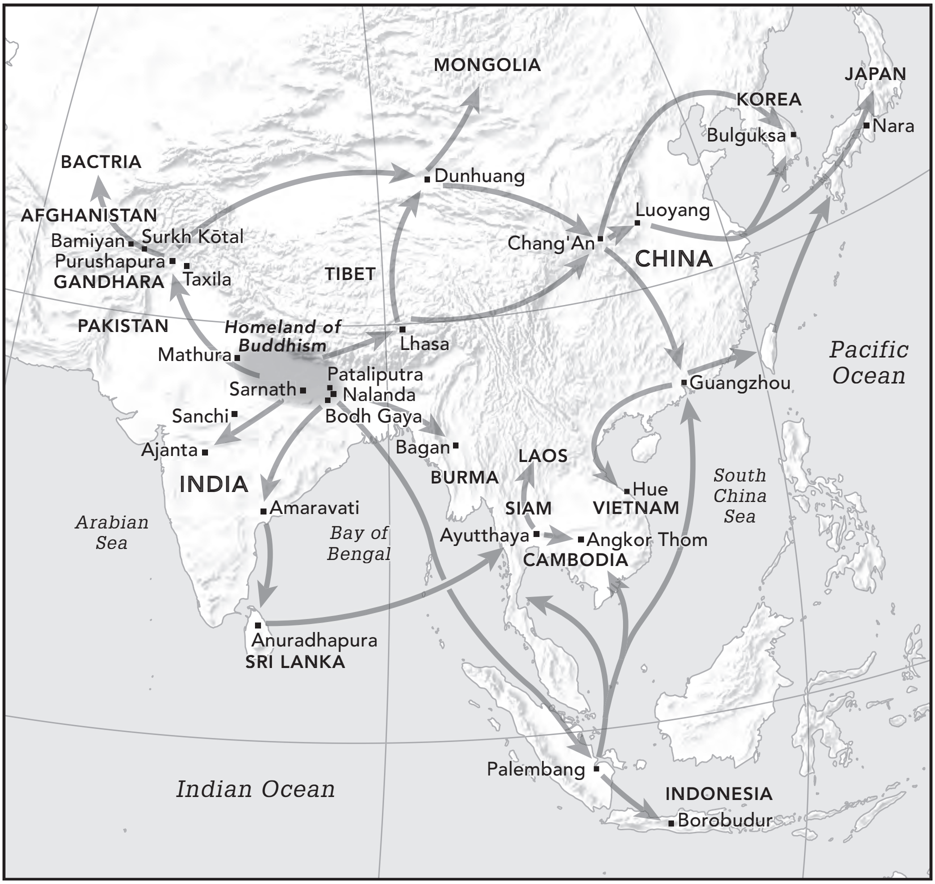
Both Sanskrit epics, *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, feature great battles as the climax of their narrative arcs. So, too, the *Buddhacharita* features a climactic battle. Mara the causer of death, who is also identified as Kama the instigator of desire, is an implacable enemy of Moksha. With his three sons and three daughters, and with a host of demonic apparitions, Mara leads an attack on the seated renouncer. Shakyamuni need not fight back; he simply remains calm and unmoved in the face of Mara's assaults. A heavenly voice proclaims Shakyamuni's firmness, and Mara must admit defeat. For Ashvaghosha, Shakyamuni's facing down Mara and his armies is as epic as Rama's victory over Ravana and the Rakshasas. And like the epic composers, Ashvaghosha continues his account into the postwar (or postenlightenment) period. In the epics, the Kshatriya kings Yudhishthira and Rama restore imperial polities on the basis of Dharma. In the *Buddhacharita*, the Kshatriya-born renouncer Buddha Shakyamuni founds a new and long-lasting community of religious followers, grounded on his teachings of Dharma.

The Brahmin-raised Buddhist-convert poet Ashvaghosha frames his Kushana Era courtly epic of the Buddha's heroic quest around multiple contending visions of Dharma. He acknowledges and provisionally accepts the great variety of codes of conduct that people observe as Dharma: the royal Dharma of King Shuddhodana, the wifely Dharma-partnership of Yashodhara, the austere Dharma of forest-dwelling Brahmin ascetics, and the class-inflected Dharma of the virtuous citizens of Kapilavastu. These are all fine in their places, Ashvaghosha suggests. They may well lead to desirable worldly ends, and even to heavenly rebirths. But Ashvaghosha envisions a hierarchy of Dharma. The Buddha Shakyamuni, in his quest to escape the bondage of rebirth altogether, seeks a higher Dharma, which the poet (using the vocabulary of the Absolute) refers to as True Dharma, Imperishable Dharma, Supreme Dharma. To pursue it, Shakyamuni must resist or reject lesser calls of Dharma, such as his father's concern for dynastic continuity and his wife's desire for a ritual partnership in conjugal Dharma. In effect, he also abdicates the Dharma-kingship that Yudhishthira and Rama exemplify. As Ashvaghosha argues, Shakyamuni's Dharma is of a different order. As he explains to the first person he meets after his enlightenment, "I have no teacher. I have obtained Nirvana; I am not the same as others. Know that I am the Self-existent with respect to Dharma" (chapter 15). This is the new Dharma he will spend forty-five years conveying to others.

The Buddha's Expanding Sangha

Ashvaghosha concludes his biographical epic not with the physical death of Shakyamuni (his *parinirvana*), but with the division of his mortal remains and with Ashoka Maurya's redivision of them to enliven eighty-four thousand stupas. It is an apt metaphor, in the poet's mind, for the expanding posthumous life of the Buddha and the religious community he founded.

The Buddha himself had urged his disciples to wander and to spread his teachings widely. The emperor Ashoka accelerated this dissemination with his great project of stupa construction. During his reign the preeminent monk Moggaliputta Tissa dispatched missionary monks from northern India to outlying regions throughout southern Asia.[23] According to later chronicles, one group took the Buddhist teachings to Kashmir and Gandhara, others to the Narmada River, to northern Karnataka, to the Gujarat coast, to central Maharashtra, to Kerala in the far south, and to the Himalayan foothills. Other missionary groups were sent beyond the subcontinent, into the "Land of the Greeks" (likely the Bactrian region), to the "Land of Gold" somewhere in southeast Asia, and to Sri Lanka. The spread of the Buddhist Sangha continued during the Kushana Era. Nomadic monks took advantage of the widespread networks of trade and transport in this first World System and ventured still farther afield, into Central Asia and China. There were Buddhist communities within Parthian-ruled Iran, and smaller enclaves of Buddhists may have existed in cosmopolitan cities of the Mediterranean, like Alexandria and Antioch, supported by traveling merchants and locals.[24] Often they traveled into new territories at the invitation of local rulers. Buddhism could be a means for ambitious rulers and polities, following the model of Ashoka, to develop a ruling ideology and to secure greater control over culturally diverse territories. During the Kushana Era, Buddhism became a truly pan-Asian religious formation (**Map 15**).



MAP 15. Dissemination of Buddhist Religious Cultures

Of the many new directions traveled by Buddhist teachers, the two most significant were southward to Sri Lanka and northward into China. The introduction of Buddhism into Sri Lanka took place in the Mauryan Era, during Ashoka's reign. Buddhism spread into China first during the Kushana Era.

Sri Lanka: The Mission of Mahinda and Sanghamitta

How exactly did Buddhist religious culture spread? How did it come to be imported into new territories? Who and what were involved in transmitting Buddhism? The *Dipavamsa*, a fourth-century Pali-language chronicle, provides a detailed account of one such transmission. The central concern of this work, announced in its first verse, is to relate how the Buddhist teaching (*shasana*) was conveyed to the island of Sri Lanka. It is not just a matter of imparting the new Dharma of the Buddha's teachings. What must also be imported into a new territory are the Sangha as an institutional order and the relics and other physical emblems related to the person of the Buddha—in other words, all three "jewels" of the Buddhist religious culture.

The *Dipavamsa* is not a contemporary account of the events it relates. Nor is it a factual account, in the manner modern historians would recognize. For generations, monks and nuns of the Mahavihara monastery in Anuradhapura passed down an oral chronicle of the noteworthy events pertaining to their monastic community and its relations with the rulers of the island. The *Dipavamsa* is the earliest composition based on these traditions. (A century or so later, the monk Mahanama would compose a lengthier and more accomplished account, the *Mahavamsa*, dealing with a wider swath of Sri Lankan history.) Many scholars believe the *Dipavamsa* was the work of the nuns of the monastery since the text features an unusually detailed lineage of female mendicants. Removed by several centuries from the original events, the *Dipavamsa* tells a paradigmatic tale of Buddhist dissemination.[25]

The story begins far from Sri Lanka, in the Mauryan capital of Pataliputra, with Ashoka and the Buddhist Thera (elder), Moggaliputta Tissa. Once Ashoka comes into contact with Buddhist teachers, he becomes an enthusiastic patron of the order. After sponsoring eighty-four thousand monasteries, he declares to the Buddhist mendicants, "Friends, now I am an heir (*dayado*) in the religion of the teacher Buddha" (DV 7.8). The far-sighted Moggaliputta sees an opportunity in Ashoka's fervor, and he tells the king he is not really a "heir" yet. The true heir is one who gives a son or daughter to the Sangha. Ashoka quickly volunteers his son Mahinda, age twenty, and his daughter Sanghamitta, age eighteen. To enable their father to achieve his desire, they immediately agree. The monks quickly perform the initiatory ceremony of renunciation for both of them, and the monks also confer ordination on Mahinda. Moggaliputta takes on Mahinda as his special pupil and conveys to him all the necessary Buddhist teachings.

With Ashoka's blessings, Moggaliputta dispatches squads of five missionary monks to convey the Buddhist *shasana* to outlying regions both within and without the Mauryan empire. The *Dipavamsa* makes clear that these monks possess not only learning in the Buddhist teachings, but also the great supernatural powers (*maharddhi*) that come with higher levels of attainment. The miraculous powers will be needed when they come into contact with indigenous Nagas, Yakshas, and Pishachas. Moggaliputta appoints Mahinda as leader of the delegation to Sri Lanka. His group first spends some time at Sanchi in the Vidisha region, where Mahinda is able to instruct his mother, Maya. Then he and his group, using one of their superpowers, fly to Sri Lanka and take up residence on Mount Missaka. Sanghamitta remains in Pataliputra; her task in Sri Lanka will come later.

One day the Sri Lankan King Devanampiya Tissa, hunting with his entourage, comes across Mahinda meditating on the mountain. The king is perplexed. "Who is this bald man dressed in yellow robes, sitting all alone, who speaks to me in a nonhuman tongue?" he wonders. Mahinda answers: "Kshatriya king, you ask who I am. I am a Shramana, and I belong to the human world. Great king, we Shramanas are pupils of the King of Dharma, and we have come here from Jambudvipa out of compassion for you" (DV 12.50-51). The king puts down his weapons and sits with the strange-looking Shramana. Mahinda begins to expound the Buddhist Dharma to the king, and forty thousand of the king's troops are so impressed that they take refuge. The king invites Mahinda and his fellow monks to the capital. He sends a chariot to bring them, but the monks reject this luxurious conveyance and instead fly through the air to reach the city.

In the capital, the king has a special pavilion built within the palace to receive the monks. He honors them and serves them an excellent meal. Then the king directs his queen Anula Devi to pay her respects. Anula and her five hundred attendants salute the monks. When Mahinda preaches the teachings of the Buddha—and throughout its narration the *Dipavamsa* carefully specifies the exact texts Mahinda uses in each pedagogic situation—Anula and her attendants listen attentively and gain the status of "stream-enterers." These women of the court are the first in Sri Lanka to attain such a spiritual status.

Mahinda goes out from the palace, and each time he teaches a new Buddhist text in public, crowds of people convert to Buddhism. To keep the monks nearby, the king proposes to donate a royal pleasure garden to the order. It is neither too close to the city nor too far away, quiet enough for meditation but also easily accessible for interested visitors, as a Buddhist monastic site should be. When the king formally presents the garden to the monks, the earth begins to quake and the sky to thunder. The king and others are terrified but Mahinda calms them, explaining, "This is the first monastery on the most excellent Lanka island. This first earthquake is due to the foundation here of the Buddha's shasana" (DV 13.36). Following this, Mahinda throws down flowers at other places, and each time another earthquake occurs. Mahinda foretells that each place will be the site of some feature of the monastic institution: the boundary, the bathing hall, the ceremonial hall, the place for donations, the refectory, and so on. One will be the site for planting a branch of the Bodhi tree under which the Buddha sat on the night of his enlightenment. Still another marks the spot where the relics of the Buddha's body will be deposited and a stupa erected above it. In the *Dipavamsa*, these earth-shaking events map out the plan for implanting Buddhist religious culture on the island, but more will be needed to bring Mahinda's plan to fruition.

After spending a rainy-season retreat on Mount Missaka, Mahinda announces to the king that he and the other monks wish to return to Jambudvipa, since they have not seen the Buddha for a long time. Understanding Mahinda's implication, Devanampiya quickly proposes to erect a stupa in Anuradhapura. The monks require the relics of the Buddha for "seeing" the Buddha. Mahinda sends an emissary monk to the Mauryan emperor, requesting relics so Ashoka's new ally, the Lankan king, can build a stupa in this new Buddhist territory. Ashoka is happy to grant the request. The monk also visits the god Indra, who provides him with the Buddha's right collar bone. When the monk returns bearing relics, the king has them placed on the back of an elephant, and they process in great pomp through the city and out to the site of the future stupa. With the arrival of Buddha relics, the third jewel has joined the Dharma and the Sangha in Devanampiya's kingdom.

Meanwhile, Queen Anula has become a committed believer in the three jewels and requests to join the Sangha as a nun. Mahinda explains that male monks cannot initiate females. He suggests that his sister Sanghamitta and a group of nuns from Pataliputra could be invited to come to Lanka to set up a female order. Not waiting, Anula takes matters in her own hands. She and her group of five hundred attendants set up a separate residence and begin to practice the ten moral precepts on their own, much as the Buddha's foster-mother Mahaprajapati had done. The king's nephew Arittha travels to Pataliputra and explains the situation to Ashoka and to Sanghamitta. Ashoka is initially reluctant to allow his daughter to leave, but Sanghamitta persuades him. "My brother's request is very serious to me, o king," she points out. "The Kshatriya queen Anula and all the royal women are counting on me to perform the going-forth initiation" (DV 15.94-95). Assenting to her determination, Ashoka also decides to send a branch of the Bodhi tree along with her. Sanghamitta and her retinue of ten nuns travel by boat to Lanka. As the Bodhi branch passes by, all sorts of Nagas, Yakshas, Pishachas, and other semidivine beings honor it with praises and celebrate it with much dancing and finger-snapping. When the group lands, all the people of Anuradhapura come to the shore to meet and greet the new arrivals with garlands and perfume. The Bodhi tree is rooted into its special place, and the king appoints tree-guardians. Sanghamitta and the nuns from Pataliputra teach in Anuradhapura and perform the initiation of going-forth for Anula and her five hundred attendants. Thus is established the female Sangha of Lanka.

In its exemplary narrative of Buddhist propagation, the *Dipavamsa* tells how all three fundamental features of its religious culture—Dharma, Sangha, and Buddha—come to be implanted in Sri Lanka. It begins with the missionary agenda of an esteemed monk in the imperial center of Pataliputra, abetted by the Mauryan emperor Ashoka. Through persuasive teachings, accompanied by a few well-timed miraculous displays, the immigrant monks establish a monastic center near the Lankan capital. Members of the local royal family are among the first to commit to the Buddhist project. With royal support the monks and then the nuns are able to initiate new members of the order from the local population. The final key to the foundation of Sri Lankan Buddhism is the transfer of icons. The Buddha's relics and the Bodhi branch link the new Buddhist community back to its founding person and root it in its new territory. Sanghamitta's transplanted Bodhi tree in Anuradhapura persists today as one of the key pilgrimage sites in Sri Lankan Buddhist culture (**Fig. 27**).

China: Emperor Ming's Dream

As for Buddhism in China, it begins with an emperor's dream—or so goes one well-known origin story. One night the Han Chinese emperor Ming (r. 57–75 CE) saw a golden deity flying around in front of the imperial palace. The next morning he inquired among his ministers. Could they explain this extraordinary apparition? One courtier reported that he had heard of a sage in India who had attained salvation. The body of this sage was said to have a golden hue, and he could fly. The minister added that this sage was known there as the "Buddha." The emperor immediately dispatched a group of envoys to the "Yuezhi" (that is, to the Kushana court) to find out about the remarkable sage and his teachings. The emissaries later returned with manuscripts of the Buddha's teachings, with relics and holy images, and with two Indian Buddhist monks, Dharmaratna and Kashyapa Matanga. As legend has it, Emperor Ming had a monastery built in the capital for them, known as the "White Horse Temple."[26]

If the *Dipavamsa* narrative describes a mission sent from the Mauryan imperial center at Pataliputra south to the outlying island of Sri Lanka, the Chinese tale relates how emissaries from the Han capital of Luoyang took the initiative to import the essential elements of Buddhist religious culture from the Indian kingdom of the Kushanas or, as they called them, the Yuezhi.

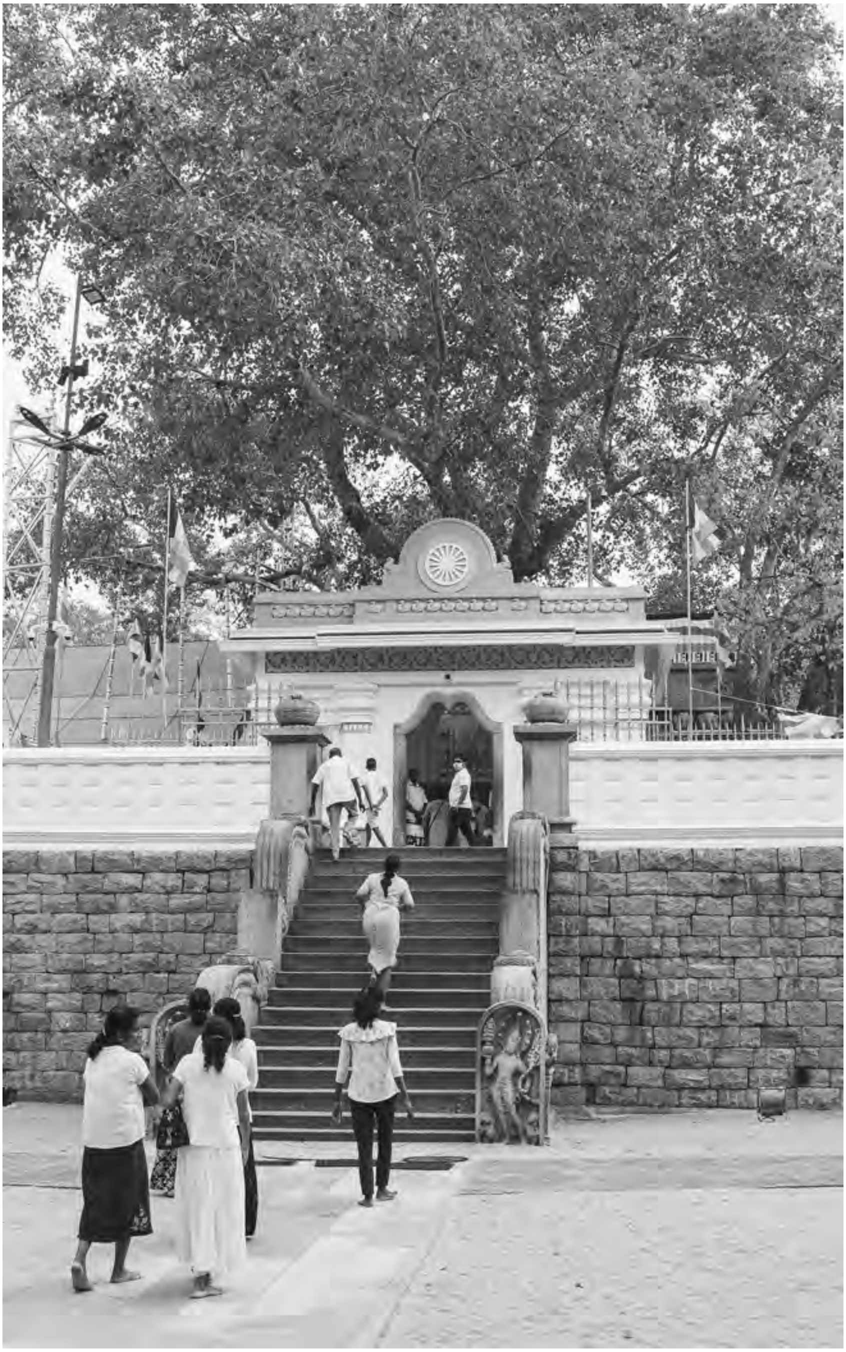


FIGURE 27. Bodhi Tree Shrine. Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka.

Whatever the veracity of this legend, the earliest clear historical evidence of Buddhist presence in China does date to the reign of Emperor Ming. In 65 CE, Prince Liu Ying, half-brother to the emperor, sent a large gift of yellow and white silk to Ming to forestall punishment for disloyalty. The emperor returned the gift and issued an edict directing that the proceeds be used to sponsor a sumptuous vegetarian feast for the pious monks and lay followers of Pengchang. By the first century CE, evidently, Buddhist enclaves had sprung up in several places in China, including western outposts like Dunhuang and the capital at Luoyang.

The arrival of Buddhism in China was closely linked with broader political and commercial developments in the first World System. The consolidation and westward expansion of the Chinese empire under the Han dynasty brought Chinese rulers into contact with other polities and cultures throughout Asia. Central Asian states like Bactria and Parthia sent diplomatic missions to the Chinese capital, and Buddhist monks may have accompanied the ambassadors. The dramatic growth in the overland caravan trade across the Silk Roads brought merchants and merchandise from widely different cultures into contact with one another. Itinerant Buddhist monks traveled these trade routes with sympathetic merchants to find new patrons and to spread their message. However they arrived—dream, diplomacy, or caravan—Buddhist monks and their teachings began to gain a foothold in China during the Han period, coeval with the Kushana Era in South Asia.

As the Buddha himself acknowledged, missionaries must adapt their messages to their audiences. But how is a complex religious culture like Buddhism translated into a new complex social world like China? Who were the monks who carried this message from the Indic world, and how did they make their novel teachings understood by Chinese audiences? And who were the Chinese auditors who listened to the Buddhist teachings? In the Sri Lankan case, the *Dipavamsa* presents a simple (deceptively so) episode of translation. The king initially believes the strange-looking robed figure speaks a nonhuman language. Mahinda explains that he is a Shramana belonging to the human world. From there on, the chronicle does not mention any further problems of communication. The *Dipavamsa* account does not discuss existing Lankan religions, nor does it mention any ways the Buddhist traditions might have been altered in the new environment. It is as if Buddhist culture, like the branch of the Bodhi tree, grew up without modification in Sri Lanka. Chinese Buddhism presents a more complicated story.

By the first century CE, Buddhists in India had created an enormous, diverse, and often abstruse corpus of teachings. There were multiple schools of thought and practice, each with its own distinctive doctrines. Buddhists transmitted their teachings, most often orally, in a plethora of vernacular languages suited to the different regions in which they lived and taught. China, of course, already had its own rich intellectual and religious traditions, which we generally refer to as Confucian, Daoist, and "Chinese popular religion." The primary task for the early Buddhist monks in China was to find a way to translate Indian Buddhist thought in a way that would be comprehensible to a Chinese audience. The outcome, as Stephen Teiser observes, was a "hybrid" involving both Indic and Chinese contributions in the creation of something new and distinct from either original source.

The pioneer Buddhist monks in China were a heterogeneous group of immigrants from the Kushana-ruled areas of northwest India, from the Parthian regions of northern Iran and Afghanistan, and from smaller Central Asian oasis kingdoms. They brought with them Buddhist texts, memorized or handwritten in manuscript form, which had been composed and recited in Indic languages. (Buddhist scholars debate which Indian languages served as the source languages—Sanskrit, Gandhari, or various vernacular regional Prakrits.) When they arrived in China, most did not know Chinese. To translate their texts or explain the ideas in them, they had to find Chinese collaborators. The Chinese speakers in turn had to find ways to express unfamiliar Buddhist concepts in familiar Chinese terminology. Translation became a committee affair, in which no one understood both Indian and Chinese languages fluently enough to judge the outcome.

The first successful Buddhist translator in China was An Shigao, a monk from the Parthian kingdom of Arsacid. According to tradition, he was a member of the ruling family who renounced his succession to the throne to study in a Buddhist monastery. He traveled to the Chinese capital of Luoyang in 148 CE, and with the support of pious lay followers he established a translation center there. He worked with An Xuan, a merchant from a Parthian region who had become a Buddhist lay follower, and with Yan Fotiao, the first known Chinese Buddhist monk. One member of the team would recite or read the Indic original aloud, another bilingual member would suggest a Chinese translational equivalent, and an assistant would note it in writing. Others would be employed to check for accuracy. Sometimes the Parthian master would add some oral explication to the text, and this might be incorporated into the new translation. Then a Chinese collaborator would polish the style, and the monks would ascertain if the final translation was true to the original source.[27]

Among the vast ocean of available Buddhist works, personal selectivity played a role in determining what was translated at this early stage. An Shigao's team focused especially on meditative techniques from the mainstream schools of Buddhism. The next major translation workshop, under the guidance of Lokakshema (active 178–198 CE), an Indo-Scythian monk from the Gandhara region, made early Mahayana works available in Chinese for the first time.

Even with a conscientious working method, questions of cultural translation arose. Was it possible for key Buddhist terms to be given Chinese equivalents? For example, the multivalent Sanskrit term Dharma was rendered by the Chinese term *fa* (law, principle, method), which conveyed its own penumbra of meanings. In some cases, new Chinese words had to be created. The "Buddha" became "Fotuo" in China, an attempt simply to mimic in Chinese the sound of the Indic title. In a broader sense, Indian concepts also had to be rendered in ways at least somewhat familiar within Chinese culture. The Indic notion of *karman*, with connotations of moral retribution and transmigration, found an imperfect analogy in the Chinese idea of one's individual lot (*fen*) and destiny (*ming*). The practice of renunciation, so fundamental to Buddhist monasticism, could be understood as more or less parallel to the Chinese ideal of the wise sage who retires from public affairs. Buddhist techniques of meditation had at least a few similarities with existing Daoist practices of breath control and trance. Might Buddhist Nirvana be similar to the Daoist ideal of *wuwei*, or nonintentional action? But sometimes superficial resemblances masked fundamental differences. Daoists and Buddhists sought liberation, but Daoists imagined it in terms of bodily immortality, while Buddhists adhered to a fundamental principle of transience.[28]

Processes of encounter, comparison, competition, and dialogue between Indian Buddhist ideas and those already present in China would lead over time to innovative understandings and developments both within Buddhism and beyond it. From its initial advent in China in the early centuries CE, Buddhism would become in later centuries a fully Chinese religion, with many different schools and sects. And China would later become an emanating center of Buddhist religious culture, much as India had been. From China, Buddhist culture would enter Korea in the fourth century, Japan starting in the sixth century, and into northern Vietnam in the eighth century.

In China, and in all of East Asia, Mahayana teachings made an especially strong impact, and these religious cultures are often classified as "Mahayana Buddhism." Mahayana calls itself the "great vehicle," but what does this mean? The historical origins of Mahayana lie in northern India in the Kushana Era, although Mahayana Buddhists trace their traditions back to the direct teachings of the Buddha Shakyamuni.

The Idea of One Buddha Vehicle

With geographical dispersal in South Asia and beyond came a multiplicity of Buddhist "schools" (*nikaya*). Early on, there had been dissidents who offered alternative views within the Sangha. One hundred years after the Buddha's death, a second Buddhist council was called to adjudicate disputes among factions over a series of monastic practices. Two contending groups emerged from the council: the Sthaviras (School of the Elders) and the Mahasanghika (Great Assembly). In subsequent years, monastic communities separated further over both doctrinal issues and rules of discipline. Later accounts speak of eighteen such "schools" among the early Buddhists, but even more than that are mentioned in early Buddhist texts. Countering this fissiparous tendency was the desire among many to maintain a single cohesive religious community. Not surprisingly, the emperor Ashoka was one of the centralizers. On the pillars he placed at Sanchi and Sarnath, he strongly urged the Sangha to be united and to endure forever.

During the Kushana Era a new series of texts and teachings appeared that expanded on the earlier Buddhist doctrines and pushed them in new directions. Some of these new works promised a "perfection of wisdom" (*prajna-paramita*) while others offered guidance in reaching pure "Buddha-fields" (*buddha-kshetra*). Some stressed that the spiritual path of the Bodhisattva—who seeks the salvation of all beings—was superior to that of the Arhat, who is concerned with individual enlightenment. Some advocated the principle of "emptiness" (*shunyata*) as a key Buddhist presupposition. Other new formulations were promoted, such as the "three bodies" of the Buddha and the "Buddha-nature" inherent in all beings. These various new teachings initially appeared in different texts advocated by unconnected groups of monastics, but they would eventually come to be seen retrospectively as a single movement, a Mahayana or "Great Vehicle." (The Sanskrit term *yana*, from a root meaning "to go," can refer to a journey or to any conveyance used for movement, like a cart or a chariot.) Proponents of the Great Vehicle would disparage the earlier or more conservative teachings as Hinayana, an "Inferior Vehicle." Of course, those who adhered to the earlier teachings did not adopt this pejorative label for themselves. (Historians of Buddhism now usually refer to non-Mahayana Buddhist schools as "mainstream Buddhism.") Despite the divisive rhetoric, monks and nuns of both persuasions lived together in the same monasteries and observed the same monastic discipline.

The Mahayana movement should not be seen as a radical departure from earlier Buddhism, as its proponents sometimes portrayed it. Rather, it represents a doctrinal expansion of concepts already latent within Buddhism, further steps along paths that Indian Buddhists were already following.[29] The early Mahayana works themselves claimed continuity. In fact, they generally portrayed their new teachings as words that the Buddha Shakyamuni had delivered to his followers during his lifetime, as if they had simply been neglected or overlooked by the monks who compiled and transmitted the earliest canon of the Buddha's teachings and only now were coming to light. One can readily understand new Mahayana ideas as growing out of well-accepted mainstream Buddhist concepts. The seemingly radical Mahayana doctrine declaring the emptiness of all categories is already latent in the early anti-essentialist Buddhist teachings of no-self, dependent co-origination, and impermanence. The Mahayana emphasis on the religious ideal of the Bodhisattva seeking the salvation of all beings expands on the growing popularity of Jataka stories of the Buddha Shakyamuni's many previous lives as a Bodhisattva, in which he practiced and demonstrated the moral perfections of generosity and compassion leading him eventually to Buddhahood. Nevertheless, the emergence of the new Mahayana Buddhist teachings during the first centuries CE was not without conflict. The best-known early Indian Mahayana work, the *Lotus Sutra*, recognizes this tension and seeks to overcome it.

In the *Lotus Sutra*—or, more fully, the "Lotus-Flower of the True Dharma Sutra"—the Buddha states that he values the wisdom of the Buddhas over that of the disciples (*shravakas*, literally "listeners") and that of the individually enlightened *pratyekabuddhas*.[30] He explains that he has taught all these paths employing skillful means or strategies (*upaya*). Many of the disciples and lay followers are confused by this, and the most erudite of them, Shariputra, speaks up on their behalf. Does this mean that he and other accomplished Arhats have somehow received an incomplete Dharma? Are disciples such as he on an inferior path? Many in the large assembly take the Buddha's statement as an affront, and five thousand monks, nuns, and lay followers stage a walkout. The Buddha is unperturbed. It is like the chaff being separated from the grain of the Sangha. Prompted by Shariputra's question, the Buddha goes on to elaborate what he calls the True Dharma.

Buddhas like himself appear in the world for one great reason: to lead all beings toward the knowledge and insight of the Buddha. However, in a world filled with corruptions and defilements, most beings are not ready to hear their subtle message. It is necessary therefore to find expedient methods to guide different audiences with differing obstacles to overcome. Using their strategic skill (*upaya-kaushalya*), Buddhas adopt millions of such pedagogic methods appropriate to the myriad predicaments in which people find themselves. In particular, he has taught three main paths in the present setting: the path of the disciple leading to the status of Arhat and an individual Nirvana, the path of the solitary *pratyekabuddha* also leading to an individual Nirvana, and the path of the Bodhisattva leading eventually to the status of Buddhahood. But these are all strategies to enable different beings to enter on the singular path, the One Buddha Vehicle (*buddha-yana*). The Buddha's teachings to disciples like Shariputra, leading them to the individual Nirvana of the Arhat, have been an expedient means to set them on the right path, not a final destination.

Shariputra is delighted beyond measure by this new revelation. He quickly sees the new vista of Buddhahood beyond Arhat status that opens before him. The gods celebrate with a great rain of flowers. They endorse the Buddha's words as a new turning of the Dharma: "In the Deer Park at Rishipatana, Benares, the Lord previously set in motion the wheel of Dharma. Today the Lord sets in motion a second unsurpassed wheel of Dharma" (LS p. 70). While Shariputra is convinced, he also recognizes that other disciples are still experiencing doubt and uncertainty, and so he asks the Buddha to explain further. The Buddha does so in the form of allegorical stories. Those with intelligence, he says, will understand.

The first allegory tells of a father with many children, whose house catches on fire. How is he to get the children out? First he tries to explain that the house is on fire and they should leave, but the children do not comprehend the threat and go on happily playing with their toys. The father realizes he must adopt a new method. Since the children are attached to their precious playthings, he describes some even better toys. Outside the house, he tells them, are some awesome carts: goat-drawn carts, deer-drawn carts, and ox-drawn carts. These are exactly what the children most desire, and they all rush out of the burning house. They are saved. In the yard, the children demand the promised toys. Instead of the different carts, the father gives each of them a much more fabulous jeweled cart, each hitched to a pure white ox. So, asks the Buddha, did the father lie to his children? He employed a strategy to preserve their lives. The Buddha then extrapolates the allegorical parallels for his audience. He, too, resorts to the promises of the different vehicles, to induce the inhabitants of the world to escape, as if from a house aflame, and then he gives the One Buddha Vehicle equally to all.

The Buddha's allegory is an expedient means to explain the One Buddha Vehicle. The idea of a singular vehicle is itself a strategy by which the *Lotus Sutra* seeks to encompass the multiple schools of Buddhism as valid but provisional and lesser religious methods of attainment, all leading toward a singular end of Buddhahood.

On Vulture Peak, the Buddha Shakyamuni goes on to relate more allegories to convey his key teaching of One Buddha Vehicle encompassing many paths.

Later in his discourse, he makes one even more striking revelation. His audience may believe that he, Buddha Shakyamuni, left the royal palace of the Shakyas, renounced, practiced austerities for six years, and finally attained enlightenment sitting under the Bodhi tree at Bodh Gaya. In fact, he now discloses, he has already been enlightened for an incalculable length of time. When he tells his listeners of his own quest for liberation, that is also an expedient means, a strategy to induce them to emulate his apparent effort. The Buddha's heroic quest, as narrated by Ashvaghosha and others, is in effect a performance, designed to lead others toward Buddhahood. Nor will he die and enter parinirvana, since the Buddha is imperishable. This will be a performance, too. The idea of extinction is also a strategy, to maintain a sense of urgency among his followers.

The idea of a comprehensive Buddha Vehicle advanced in the *Lotus Sutra* proved to be a remarkably effective strategy, as Buddhist monks began to convey their diverse teachings in China, and later in other regions of East Asia. It offered a solution to the question of multiple, often conflicting, teachings within the enormous Buddhist canon of texts that were translated and adapted in new cultural circumstances. All could be seen as pedagogic strategies, adapted to different audiences with different aptitudes, directed toward a single end. For many East Asian Buddhists, the *Lotus Sutra* took on a scriptural status: "the nearest Buddhist equivalent to a bible—one revealed work containing the final truth, itself sufficient for salvation," as Paul Williams puts it.[31]

While China and East Asia found Mahayana works like the *Lotus Sutra* most to their liking, mainstream schools of Buddhism remained predominant in India. And in Sri Lanka, one conservative mainstream school, the Theravada, became dominant. From there, Theravada Buddhism prevailed in most areas of Southeast Asia. But amid the geographical dispersal and diversity of affiliations, Buddhists throughout Asia traced themselves back to the enlightenment the Buddha Shakyamuni realized (or enacted, as the *Lotus Sutra* would have it) while seated under the Bodhi tree in Bodh Gaya.

Epilogue: Bodh Gaya, February 2020

In February 2020, I joined a small group of pilgrims of the "Buddhapath" to sit near the wide-spreading branches of the Bodhi tree in Bodh Gaya. In our group of sixteen were visitors from England, South Africa, and many parts of the United States, and we were guided by Shantum Seth, an Indian follower of the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh (**Fig. 28**). Sitting quietly near the tree, we were not alone. We became part of a larger gathering. There were Tibetan monks and

FIGURE 28. Buddhapath Group at the Bodhi Tree, 2020. Bodh Gaya, Bihar.

nuns in vermillion robes, and groups of lay Buddhists from Thailand and Sri Lanka led by robed monks who instructed and led chants with portable loudspeakers. There were tourists from many nations of Asia, Europe, and North America.

The Bodhi tree occupies the devotional center of a large Buddhist complex. The tree is believed to be a direct descendant of the original Bodhi tree, under which the Buddha Shakyamuni sat during the night of his enlightenment. Immediately beneath the tree is a platform, dating to the time of Ashoka Maurya, that marks the ground on which the Buddha Shakyamuni sat. To the east of the tree and platform is a tall stone tower, housing an immense statue of the Buddha. Beyond the enclosure, in the town of Bodh Gaya, one finds shrines, monasteries, and guest houses facilitating Buddhist pilgrims from throughout Asia. In the informal list I compiled as I walked around town are institutions of thirteen nations or regions beyond India: Burma, Taiwan, Mongolia, Bangladesh, Sheehen, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Vietnam, China, with the largest presences of Tibet, Japan, and Thailand. India is also represented in Bodh Gaya by the neo-Buddhist community founded by B. R. Ambedkar.

Many modern world religions have sacred centers, places that are considered particularly holy for the faithful. One thinks of Mecca, Jerusalem, the Vatican in Rome. For Buddhists around the world, Bodh Gaya has become that kind of center. It is the place that pilgrims seek above all to visit, and it has become a place where one can see on display—in its diversity of nationalities, dress, language, and custom—the full transnational character of the modern Buddhist world. But this is a recent development.[32]

In early times Bodh Gaya was certainly an important pilgrimage place for Buddhist devotees, from the time of Ashoka Maurya. Many Chinese Buddhist monks made the long journey to Bodh Gaya. At least 183 Chinese monks recorded their visits.[33] As late as the thirteenth century, the Tibetan monk Dharmasvamin visited and spoke of Bodh Gaya as the "center of the world."[34] But by the sixteenth century, the Buddhist connection had been severed. The temple became the residence of a group of Shaiva ascetics. Only in the nineteenth century, during the British colonial period, did Bodh Gaya begin its Buddhist rebirth as the center of a modern cosmopolitan world religion.

So, too, the current Bodhi tree my pilgrim group sat under at Bodh Gaya is the child of colonial-era restoration. It was in a "very much decayed" state by the 1870s, British archeologist Alexander Cunningham reported, and in 1875 "the only remaining portion of the Tree fell over the west wall during a storm, and the Old Pipal Tree was gone."[35] Seeds were collected and soon new shoots replaced the old. Pipal trees do not live forever, of course, and Cunningham observed that "there must have been a long succession of fresh trees raised from seed, from the time of Asoka down to the present day."[36]

The British journalist and writer Edwin Arnold played a key role in this restoration. In 1871 Arnold had written a romantic account of the Buddha's life, *The Light of Asia*, based on early Buddhist hagiographies such as Ashvaghosha's *Buddhacharita*. This popular work prompted a wide interest in Buddhism across Europe. Subsequently Arnold made his own pilgrimage to Bodh Gaya in 1886 and wrote an article about it, "Buddha-Gya," published in the London *Daily Telegraph*. "Beyond doubt," he proclaims, "this is the spot, most dear and divine, and precious beyond every other place on earth, to all the four hundred million Buddhists in China, Japan, Mongolia, Assam, Cambodia, Siam, Burma, Arakan, Nepaul, Thibet, and Ceylon."[37] Arnold conveys his dismay that, sitting under the Bodhi tree, there is not a Buddhist monk, but rather a Brahmin priest of the

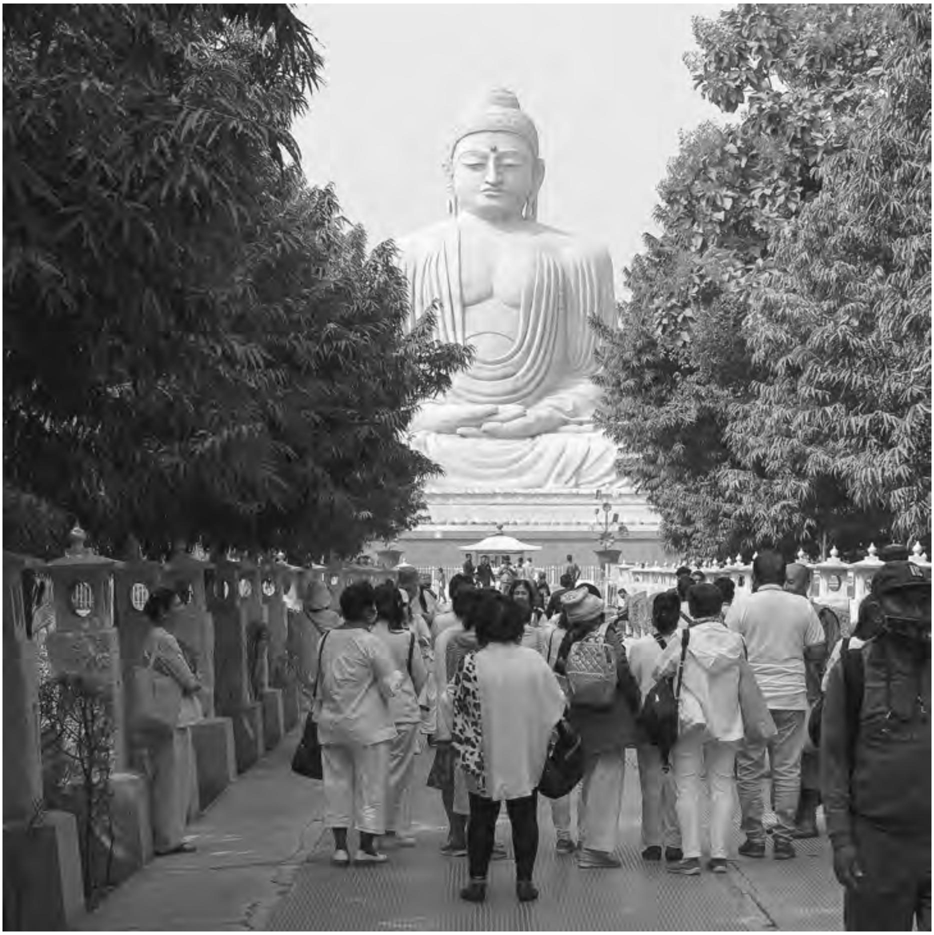


FIGURE 29. Great Buddha Statue, designed by V. Ganapathi Sthapathi, 1989. Bodh Gaya, Bihar.

Shaiva order reciting mantras. The Buddhist world, Arnold laments, has well-nigh forgotten the central emblem of their faith—“the Mecca, the Jerusalem, of a million Oriental congregations.”[38] Arnold took it upon himself to encourage Buddhist friends in Sri Lanka to work to recover control of the site, and he made proposals to colonial officials to hand the temple over to the Buddhists. Inspired by Arnold’s vision, the Sri Lankan Buddhist Anagarika Dharmapala agitated tirelessly to return Bodh Gaya to its Buddhist roots. In 1895 Dharmapala and his acolytes carried a Buddha image into the temple and began to worship it, until the opposing Shaiva occupants stopped them. A long legal dispute over proprietorship of the Bodh Gaya temple site ensued in the British court, but the colonial administration was reluctant to take sides in what they viewed as an interreligious dispute.

With Indian independence, the Nehru administration took a more favorable view toward Buddhist developments at Bodh Gaya. But it was only in the 1980s that the site took off as a potent international magnet. The Dalai Lama, a refugee from Tibet residing in India, figures in many important moments of the restoration. In 1985 he officiated at an enormous gathering to celebrate a Kalachakra festival, attracting a quarter-million participants from over thirty-one countries. In 1987, he inaugurated the first international gathering of Buddhist nuns, with participants from twenty-six nations. (The community of Buddhist nuns had died out in India around the tenth century, but it continued in other regions.) In 1989, he presided over the unveiling of the "Great Buddha Statue." This giant image of seated Buddha, rising some eighty feet high, was sponsored by the Japanese Daijokya Buddhist sect and designed by the well-known South Indian architect-sculptor V. Ganapathi Sthapathi. Along with the pyramid tower and the now wide-spreading Bodhi tree, the Great Buddha Statue appears on tourist posters as a prime icon of Bodh Gaya, the religious center of world Buddhism (**Fig. 29**). In 2004, UNESCO confirmed this ancient-but-renewed status by declaring the Bodhi temple enclosure a World Heritage Site.

10

Visual Religion: Icons, Worship, and Devotion

IN THE THIRD REGNAL YEAR OF the Kushana king Kanishka, the learned monk Bala sponsored a colossal statue of the Buddha Shakyamuni in the Deer Park at Sarnath, the place where the Buddha had given his first teachings. The powerful figure, nearly ten feet tall and three feet wide in the shoulders, stands firmly on two feet, with left hand holding the sash of his shawl at the waist. The missing right hand probably extended the gesture of "fear-not." Evidently the statue was painted; it still retained some traces of its original pigments when uncovered in the early twentieth century. Between his two feet sits a diminutive lion (**Fig. 30**). The large image originally stood under an immense stone parasol, some ten feet in diameter, decorated with fantastical animals, Buddhist symbols, and the pattern of a full-blown lotus. The statue, umbrella, and stone shaft to support the umbrella are all carved from spotted red sandstone.[1]

Both statue and umbrella shaft bear dated inscriptions. On the pillar the monk Bala identifies himself as a master of the Tripitaka, the three baskets of Buddhist teachings, and as the companion of another monk, Pushyabuddhi. He explains that he has installed the objects in Varanasi, at the place where the Buddha used to walk. Assisting him in this effort are his mother and father, his teachers, companions and students, the nun Buddhamitra who is also a master of the Tripitaka, two local rulers, and all the four sections of the Buddhist Sangha. He has done this, he proclaims, for the welfare and happiness of all beings.

At the Jetavana monastery in Shravasti, another place closely associated with the life of the Buddha, Bala established another standing Buddha image. At nearly twelve feet, it was even taller than the Sarnath one. At Kaushambi, in Kanishka's second regnal year, the nun Buddhamitra established a large standing image of the Buddha, placed at the promenade he once traversed. And in Mathura some

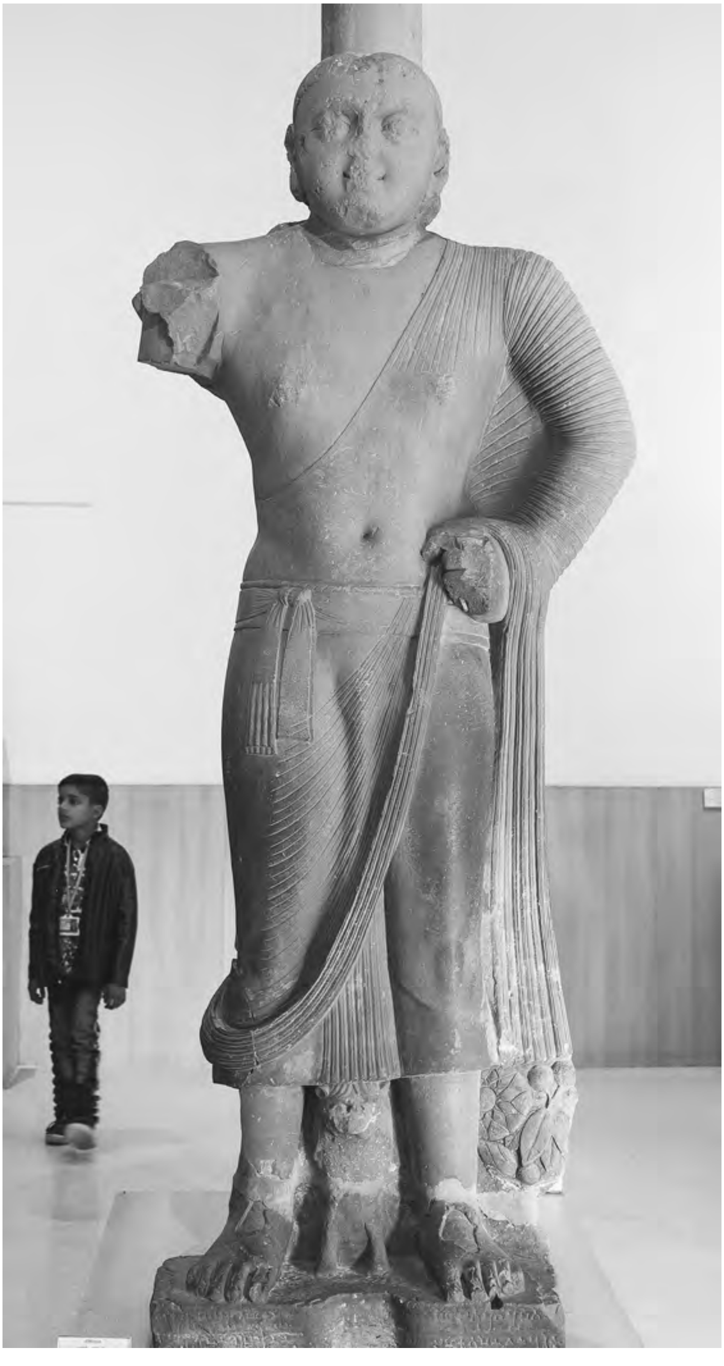


FIGURE 30. Bala's Buddha, Sarnath, 2nd century CE. Archaeological Museum Sarnath, Uttar Pradesh.

years later, during the reign of Huvishka, the nun Dhanavati commissioned a seated Buddha statue. This nun identifies herself as the niece of the learned nun Buddhamitra, whom she identifies as a pupil of the venerable monk Bala.[2]

This is striking indeed. These are among the earliest larger-than-life stone images of the Buddha Shakyamuni. The icons were ceremonially established or set up (*pratishtha*) to be honored, much as the Buddhist community had already been honoring stupas. All were sculpted from the same red sandstone quarried near Mathura. They were almost certainly fabricated in the workshops of Mathura and then shipped to other important Buddhist centers, down the Yamuna and Ganges rivers, as far as four hundred miles. Three were placed in similar pilgrimage sites, identified as "where the Buddha used to walk." The instigators of this religious innovation consisted of a small circle of erudite monks and nuns who knew each other and who worked together with other members of the Buddhist community and with local rulers. What we see, as Gregory Schopen concludes, is "something like an intentional, organized, even coordinated distribution of early images from a central point."[3] That point was Mathura, in the Kushana Era.

These monastic pioneers in Buddhist image worship were not alone in their creation of new icons for the purpose of worship. The stone workshops of Mathura had been carving large statues of earthly deities like Yakshas, Yakshis, and Nagas for some time. Among the pan-Indian religious communities, the Jains of Mathura were probably the first to begin commissioning anthropomorphic images, with the Buddhists not far behind. And votaries of various divine figures we now classify as "Hindu"—including Durga, Lakshmi, Vishnu, Krishna, Balarama, Agni, and Shiva—also sponsored new icons during the Kushana Era. Altogether in the early centuries CE, we can observe a broad embrace of the icon across multiple religious communities. Mathura was the center of this new religious culture, "the most prolific region of sculptural production in early India," as Sonya Rhie Quintanilla puts it.[4]

Along with the creation of freestanding sculptures as icons, meant to be honored and worshipped, came efforts to set out guidelines for how best to do so. Different religious groups held differing notions of the exact relationship between the image itself and the sacred being it represented—whether that be a liberated human such as Buddha Shakyamuni or Mahavira, an earthly deity like a Yaksha or a Naga, or a new Hindu deity like Durga or Vishnu. All, however, shared a conviction that an icon, once established, should be honored properly. Archeological evidence here predates textual sources. The earliest texts that spell out best practices in image worship date to several centuries after the images themselves.

No doubt these early ritual guides sought to formalize what were initially informal practices. But they provide for us a window into the developing religious practices of image worship in Kushana and later times.

The veneration of icons was one part of a new visual orientation among the pan-Indian religious communities of India in the early centuries CE. New articulations of the religious sensibility of devotion, or Bhakti, especially among the Bhagavata devotees of Krishna Vasudeva, provided a deeper way for worshipers to relate themselves to divine images, often in highly personal terms. During this period, too, visionary literature set out models for seeing beyond the material bodies or icons of figures like Krishna and the Buddha Shakyamuni, into much broader cosmic dimensions.

Embracing the Icon

The city of Mathura rose as an urban center in Mauryan times and expanded during the Shunga Era, but it does not seem to have ever come under direct Shunga rule. During the second century BCE it was ruled by Indo-Greek kings, though much of the early political history of the city is unclear. What is clear is that in the mid-second century BCE, workshops in Mathura began producing fine stone sculpture. This reached a peak during the second and third centuries CE, when Mathura became one of two primary centers of the Kushana empire. The artisans used a characteristic spotted pinkish sandstone from a nearby quarry. They were ecumenical. Sculptors fashioned images and decorative architectural elements for the shrines and monasteries of the multiple religious communities that prevailed in Mathura city, the surrounding countryside, and (as in the case of Bala's Buddha image) religious centers hundreds of miles away.

Manibhadra the Yaksha

Many of the earliest icons produced in Mathura were those of earthly deities: Yakshas, Yakshis, and Nagas. In the village of Parkham, fourteen miles south of Mathura, archeologist Alexander Cunningham came upon one particularly impressive Yaksha icon in 1882. The villagers were worshipping it as a deity they simply called "Devata" (god), but the archeologist saw it as an ancient work of sculptural art and wrote about it in his official reports. Colonial officials later had it removed from village worship, and it now stands in the Government Museum, Mathura. The officials did not bother to record the responses of those villagers whose Devata was taken away from them.

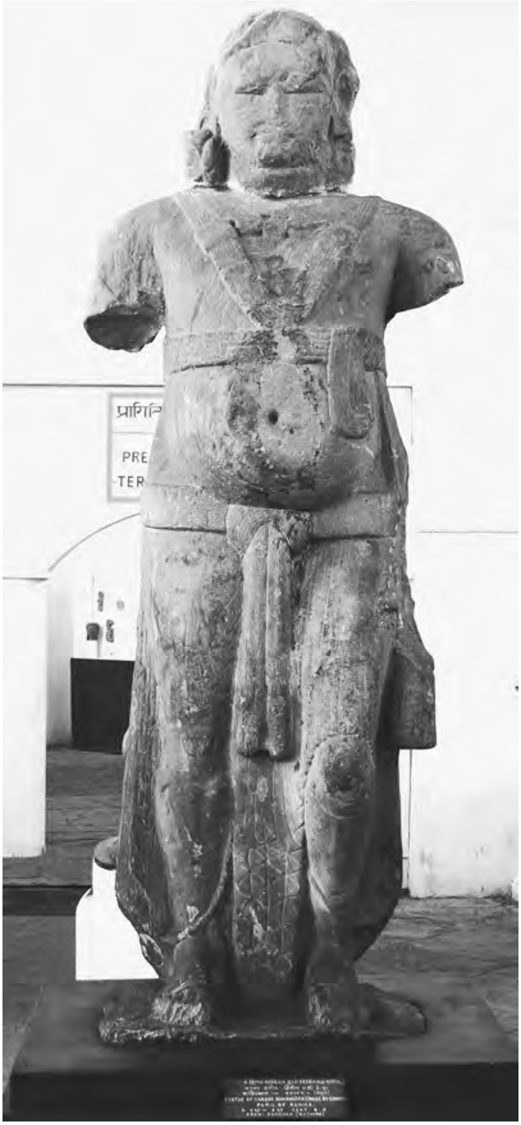


FIGURE 31. Manibhadra Yaksha, sculpture by Gomitaka, Parkham, 2nd to 1st century BCE. Archaeological Museum, Mathura, Uttar Pradesh.

Carved from a single block of stone, the freestanding statue is nearly nine feet tall (**Fig. 31**). Standing firmly on two feet with his left knee slightly flexed, the broad-shouldered ample male figure conveys power and prosperity. His two arms are missing, though the left hand originally held a bag of coins, still partly visible on his left hip. He wears a dhoti fastened with a belt at the waist. His face, unfortunately, is badly eroded, probably (as Cunningham noted) from the "repeated libations and anointments with ghi and red lead" he had received in worship over many centuries.[5]

An inscription at the feet of the statue identifies the figure, its patrons, and the artisan who made it: "This Lord (*bhagavan*) was sponsored by eight brothers of the congregation of Manibhadra. It was made by Gomitaka, the apprentice of Kunika."[6] The icon of the Yaksha Manibhadra had been set up to receive the honors of his "congregation." But Manibhadra was not only a local Yaksha. At least three other inscribed icons of this particular earthly deity have been found near Mathura and in other locations. Manibhadra the Yaksha also appears in religious texts of the period. In one episode told in the *Mahabharata*, the leader of a merchant caravan invokes the protection of Manibhadra, calling him the "king of the Yakshas." Manibhadra is associated with this-worldly wealth and prosperity, well-suited to the interests of traveling merchants. Not surprisingly, Jain and Buddhist works subsume Manibhadra within their own agendas. Early Jain scriptures name Manibhadra as a converted follower of Mahavira. In one Buddhist sutra, the "Manibhadra Sutra," Manibhadra consults with the Buddha Shakyamuni—who has provocatively moved into Manibhadra's own shrine-home in Mathura—about the sources and the extinguishing of hatred. As we've seen, Buddhist works regard the earthly deities as powerful beings who are encumbered by their hot tempers and passionate dispositions. Properly instructed by the Buddha, however, they can become valuable supporters of the Sangha.[7]

Manibhadra was not the only earthly deity in the Mathura area. In fact, Mathura seems to have been a Yaksha center, since several other colossal Yakshas have also been found in the region. So, too, with Yakshis, like the lovely laukika goddess now in the Cleveland Museum of Art (**Fig. 32**). Mathura sculptors likewise produced Naga images. These formidable freestanding icons would have stood in the center of shrines, where their congregations could honor them with flower garlands, umbrellas, flags, food offerings, song, and dance. Even as the Jains, Buddhists, and Bhagavatas gained prominence in Mathura with their own icons and shrines during the Kushana Era, the worship of Yakshas and Nagas continued. An inscription of the second century CE records the dedication of a stone slab, by the sons of the actors of Mathura, to the sacred place of the "Indra among the Nagas," Lord Dadhikarna. "May this be for the welfare and happiness of all beings," proclaim the young actors.[8] But increasingly during this period, earthly deities would also appear as subordinate, supportive figures among the sculptures and institutions of the pan-Indian religious groups, starting with the Jains.

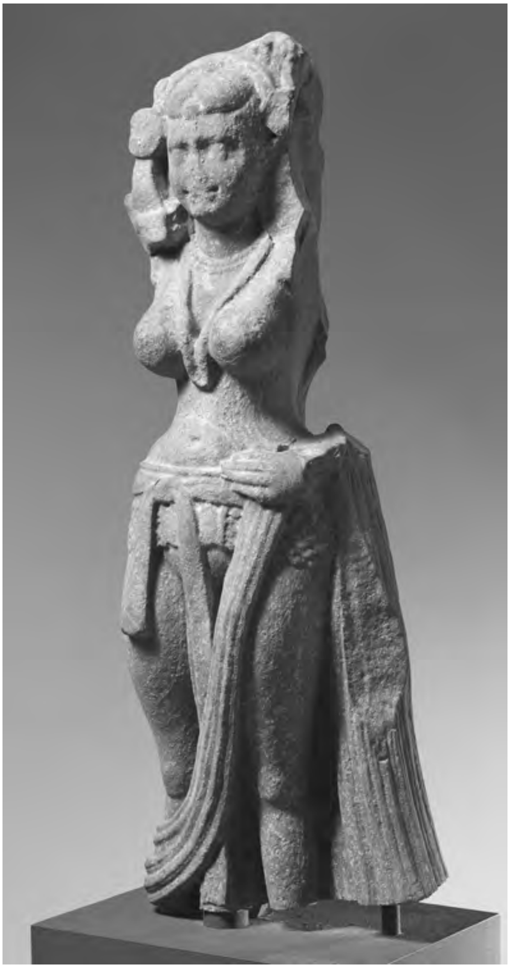


FIGURE 32. Nature Divinity (Yakshi), mottled red sandstone, Mathura, ca. 75 CE. Cleveland Museum of Art, purchase from J. H. Wade Fund (1968.104). Photo courtesy of the Cleveland Museum of Art.

Jain Images of Perfection

The Jain religious community developed a strong presence in Mathura starting in the Shunga Era, and it became prominent during Kushana times. One particular group of Jain monastics, the Ardhaphalakas ("partially covered" monks) dominated the Mathura scene.[9] Their institutional center, located outside the city fortifications, contained a Jain stupa, several shrines, and living quarters for monks and nuns. The original name for this establishment is not known; historians call it Kankali Tila, for the extensive mound (four hundred by three hundred feet in extent and over ten feet high) where, in the nineteenth century, local villagers were worshipping a goddess named Kankali. Colonial archeologists unearthed an enormous wealth of ancient sculpted remains and over a hundred inscriptions, almost all Jain ones, from this mound, dating from the second century BCE to the eleventh century CE. Among the finds were narrative and decorative sculpture that would have adorned the stupa, elaborate decorative plaques called *ayagapatas*, and the earliest three-dimensional anthropomorphic images of the liberated Jinas. Perhaps adapting practices from the congregations of the earthly deities, the Jain Ardhaphalakas of Mathura were pioneers in orienting their religious culture toward sacred icons.

Like the Buddhists of this period, the Mathura Jains constructed a large stupa at the center of their religious complex. This stupa became a focus for elaborate decorative embellishment on gateways and railings, much as Buddhist sites like Sanchi did. But in pointed contrast to the Buddhists, Jain did not place relics of Mahavira or other perfected Jinas in their stupas. Mahavira was no longer present in this world, argued the Jains, even in the form of his cremated remnants. Later Jain texts explain that this was because the gods had quickly snatched up the remains of Mahavira after his cremation, so that they could be properly worshipped in heaven.[10] The stupa might remind Jain visitors of the perfection attained by Mahavira, but Jains did not consider that the stupa embodied the continuing presence of the founding teacher.

Among the most extraordinary objects excavated from Kankali Tila are the *ayagapatas*. These are stone plaques, generally about two to three feet square, carved on one side with intricate designs of auspicious symbols, floral ornamentation, and iconic figures. The designs are concentric and symmetrical, forming mandala-like patterns. In the center is a sacred object or figure, and projecting outward from this center is an arrangement of further symbols and ornamentation. The plaques usually carry inscriptions that identify the donors and state their purpose. The majority of donors were Jain lay women. Their intention, they repeatedly say, was to honor the perfected ones. Most likely the ayagapatas were set up horizontally on pedestals, allowing Jains to view them from all directions and to circumambulate them. In the centers of these devotional plaques, anthropomorphic images of the Jinas made their earliest appearances.

The ayagapata donated by Sihanamdika, the son of a merchant, dated to the first century CE (now in the National Museum, New Delhi), offers a good example (**Fig. 33**). In the central medallion a naked Jina sits in meditation, under

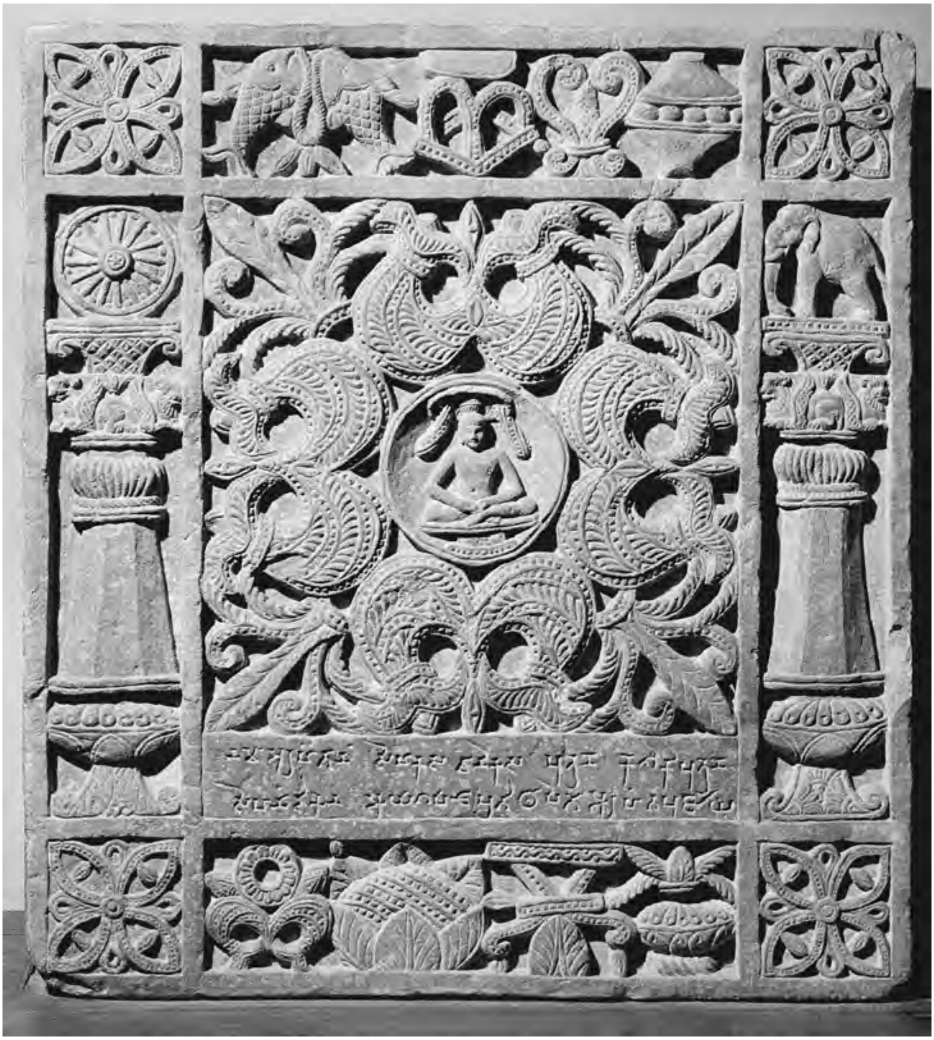


FIGURE 33. Ayagapata, Kankali Tila, Mathura, ca. 2nd century CE. National Museum, New Delhi. Photo by John C. Huntington. Courtesy of the John C. and Susan L. Huntington Photographic Archive of Buddhist and Asian Art.

a festooned parasol. This liberated being, in the Jain understanding, resides in the immortal realm of perfection, above the manifold world in which we live. Emanating outward in four directions are flowing fishtail designs representing the Jina's teachings as they penetrate into all the regions of the world. The intermediate spaces are filled with honeysuckle patterns. The square outer perimeter of the plaque, representing the worldly realm, is taken up with eight auspicious emblems above and below and two pillars on the left and right. The left pillar, holding the wheel of Dharma, is a form the Jains share with Ashoka Maurya, the Buddhists, and others—but the Jains, of course, retain their own idea of just what this Dharma entails.

Around the beginning of the Common Era, Jains began to liberate their Jinas from the ayagapata plaques and enlarge them into freestanding three-dimensional icons for devotional use. In this respect, they appear to have beaten the Buddhists to the image punch. But for the Jain Ardhaphalakas, as for the Buddhists like Bala and Buddhamitra, the full efflorescence of Jain icons in Mathura dates to the second and third centuries, when the Kushanas made the city a cosmopolitan urban center. The monks and nuns of the Ardhaphalaka order promoted the creation and establishment of new icons, and they found prosperous lay followers to sponsor them.

In 185 CE, during the reign of Huvishka (successor to Kanishka), Nagasena, a pupil of the Jain teacher Haginadi, donated an image of a Jain Tirthankara (**Fig. 34**). The Jina is a robust, broad-shouldered figure, seated cross-legged in meditation, with his two hands folded in his lap. He is a firm, symmetrical male, though his face is somewhat eroded. He sits on a pedestal supported by two lions at the corners, and a series of acolytes appear along the front surface of the platform. Above his head are the remnants of a seven-hooded snake forming a kind of canopy protecting the Jina. This snake canopy identifies the seated figure as Parshva, the Jain Tirthankara who immediately preceded Mahavira.

By the Kushana Era, the Jains had developed a list of twenty-four Tirthankaras who had attained perfection in this time-cycle, one after another. Each Tirthankara has an identifying symbol. The twenty-fourth and final Tirthankara, Mahavira, is associated with a lion. The twenty-third, Parshva, is paired with the snake. Most of the earlier Tirthankaras were no doubt legendary figures, but it is likely that Parshva, as the Tirthankara closest in time to Mahavira, was a historical figure. Scholars of Jainism believe that Parshva was an early Shramana ascetic whose ethical and renunciatory ideas Mahavira adopted and expanded into the foundational teachings of Jain religious culture. It is also possible—but not confirmed—that Mahavira may have met and studied with Parshva as an elder instructor.

In sculpture, Parshva always appears under the shelter of snake-hoods. In the religious setting of the Kushana Era, this adoption of a Naga as a protective figure appears to be a Jain claim to encompass the religious culture of those earthly deities. No longer autonomous deities, Nagas would be encompassed within the Jain religious culture as subordinate helpers, giving shelter to meditating Jinas.

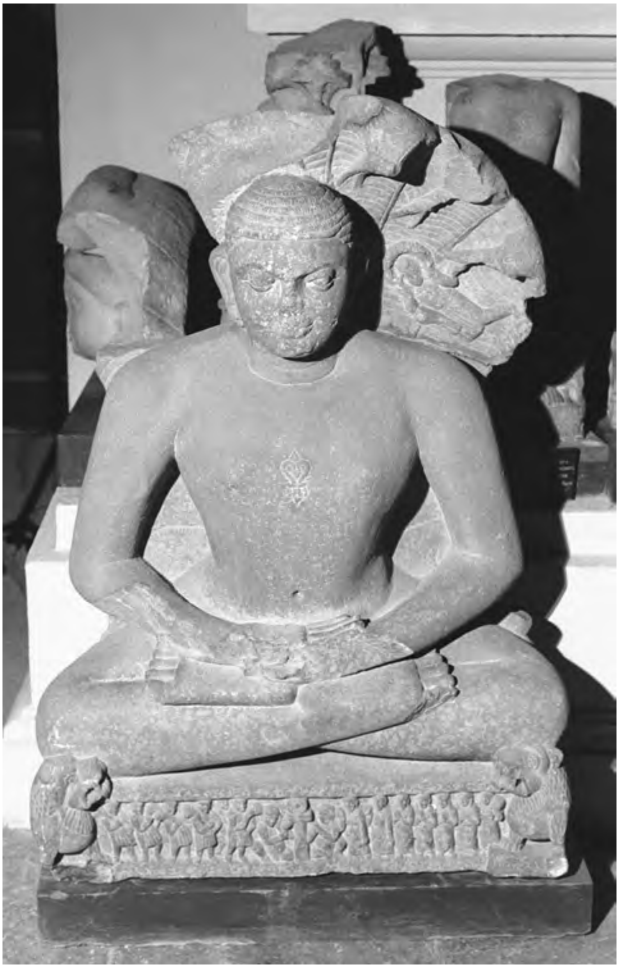


FIGURE 34. Parshvanatha Tirthankara, Mathura, 185 CE. Lucknow State Museum, Uttar Pradesh. Photo by John C. Huntington. Courtesy of the John C. and Susan L. Huntington Photographic Archive of Buddhist and Asian Art.

Later Jain texts, however, developed an origin story to account for Parshva's close relationship with snakes. In Parshva's previous birth as a prince, he rescues a snake from the sacrificial fire of a Brahmin. The Brahmin is enraged by this interference in his ritual, and he carries that rage into his rebirth as a demon. When the prince, now reborn as young Parshva, is meditating on his route to enlightenment, the former-Brahmin demon attacks him with rocks and lightning bolts. The rescued snake, now reborn as a Naga prince, comes to the defense of Parshva by sheltering him with his seven hoods. This apocryphal story highlights key Jain themes: their critique of Vedic sacrifice, the ethical value of nonviolence toward all creatures, and the implacable pull of karmic action binding individual actors across lifetimes.[11] Protected himself by the Naga prince, Parshva became the Jain Tirthankara most popular among Jain devotees for offering protection from worldly obstacles.

Icons of Jain Tirthankaras appear in one of two standard postures.[12] Either they sit cross-legged in meditation, as Nagasena's icon of Parshva, or they stand in a rigid upright meditative posture. They always appear as "human"—no extra heads, arms, or other appendages—though they do have the auspicious marks of a "Great Person," or *Mahapurusha.* They are always either naked or minimally clothed (depending on the affiliation with Digambara or Shvetambara divisions) and never wear ornaments. According to Jain conviction, all twenty-four Tirthankaras have achieved the state of perfection, and so there is no need to depict them engaged in any worldly activity other than serene sublime meditation. Since they have achieved the same perfect state, all Tirthankaras appear identical, except for their identifying symbols such as the lion, snake-hoods, or twenty-two others. From Kushana times on, these images of perfection occupy the center of Jain devotional religion.

Buddhism Imagery from Aniconism to the Icon

At the start of the Common Era, Buddhist sculptural imagery was "aniconic." That is, Buddhists chose not to represent the Buddha Shakyamuni, their founding figure, in anthropomorphic form. Rather, they indicated his presence in relief sculpture through a series of visual symbols: footprints, empty platform, wheel, bodhi tree, stupa. In the same relief panels other characters appear abundantly in human form. At Sanchi stupa near Vidisha, in the first century CE, as we have seen, sculptors covered the new gateway towers with glorious relief panels depicting the affluent Buddhist religious culture—but without a single image of the human Buddha. So, too, at other major Buddhist sites, like the Amaravati stupa in southern India. The earliest sculpture decorating that stupa site likewise consistently avoided anthropomorphic images of the Buddha Shakyamuni.

By the time of Kanishka's reign in the mid-second century CE, and the ambitious project of Bala, Buddhamitra, and other Mathura Buddhists, things were changing. Rather quickly, it appears, Buddhist religious culture embraced the iconic Buddha image. This occurred not just in Mathura, but in other Buddhist institutions around the subcontinent, such as rock-cut monastic centers in western India. In later phases of the stupa construction at Amaravati, the same shift appears.[13] Some relief panels there, in fact, depict an anthropomorphic Buddha emerging from the stupa, as if an emanating projection of his presence (**Fig. 35**). And in the abundant sculpture produced in the farther northwest center of the Kushana empire, the Gandhara region, the human Buddha Shakyamuni appears frequently, and he looks rather different than he does in Mathura.

This remarkable shift in Buddhist artistic and religious practice has long posed a series of questions for art historians. Why did early Buddhist art avoid the human form of the Buddha Shakyamuni? What caused the shift toward an acceptance of anthropomorphic images? Was the beginning of Buddha images linked to other developments in Buddhist thought, such as the emergence of Mahayana groups? Who led this shift? Was it instigated by Buddhist monastics or laity? Did royal patronage play any role in promulgating the use of images? Where did this embrace of the Buddha icon first occur—Mathura, Gandhara, or some other region? What precedents or models did early Buddhist artisans follow? What role, if any, did Greco-Roman traditions of sculptural art play in promoting the emergence of the anthropomorphic Buddha? And finally, how were these new Buddha icons to be honored? Many of these questions remain unresolved and are matters of research and lively debate among historians of Buddhism.

Buddhists of the period had their own questions about the new image-making practices. Many Buddhists remained skeptical or rejected the role of icons outright. As Robert DeCaroli puts it, an uneasy relationship developed between Buddhist teachers and depictions of the Teacher, and this ambivalence or debate appears in many Buddhist works of the early centuries CE. “Within the literature from this period,” he observes, “one can find exhibitions of wild enthusiasm directed toward the prospect of seeing images of the Buddha, and harsh denunciations or denigration of all image-centered practices.”[14]

Proponents of the Buddha image gave it an origin story. This narrative, not surprisingly, places the first image in the lifetime of the Buddha Shakyamuni, ascribes it to a royal lay patron, and stamps it with the Buddha’s own seal of approval. As the story has it, the Buddha leaves northern India to visit the heaven of the thirty-three Vedic gods in order to teach Dharma to his deceased mother. King Prasenajit, ruler of the Kosala kingdom, becomes so bereft at the Teacher’s absence that he orders an image of the Buddha to be carved out of sandalwood. He places it in the Jetavana monastery on the outskirts of his capital, Shravasti. When the living Buddha returns, the carved statue stands up to greet him. The Buddha tells the image that it should return to its own seat, and he approves of

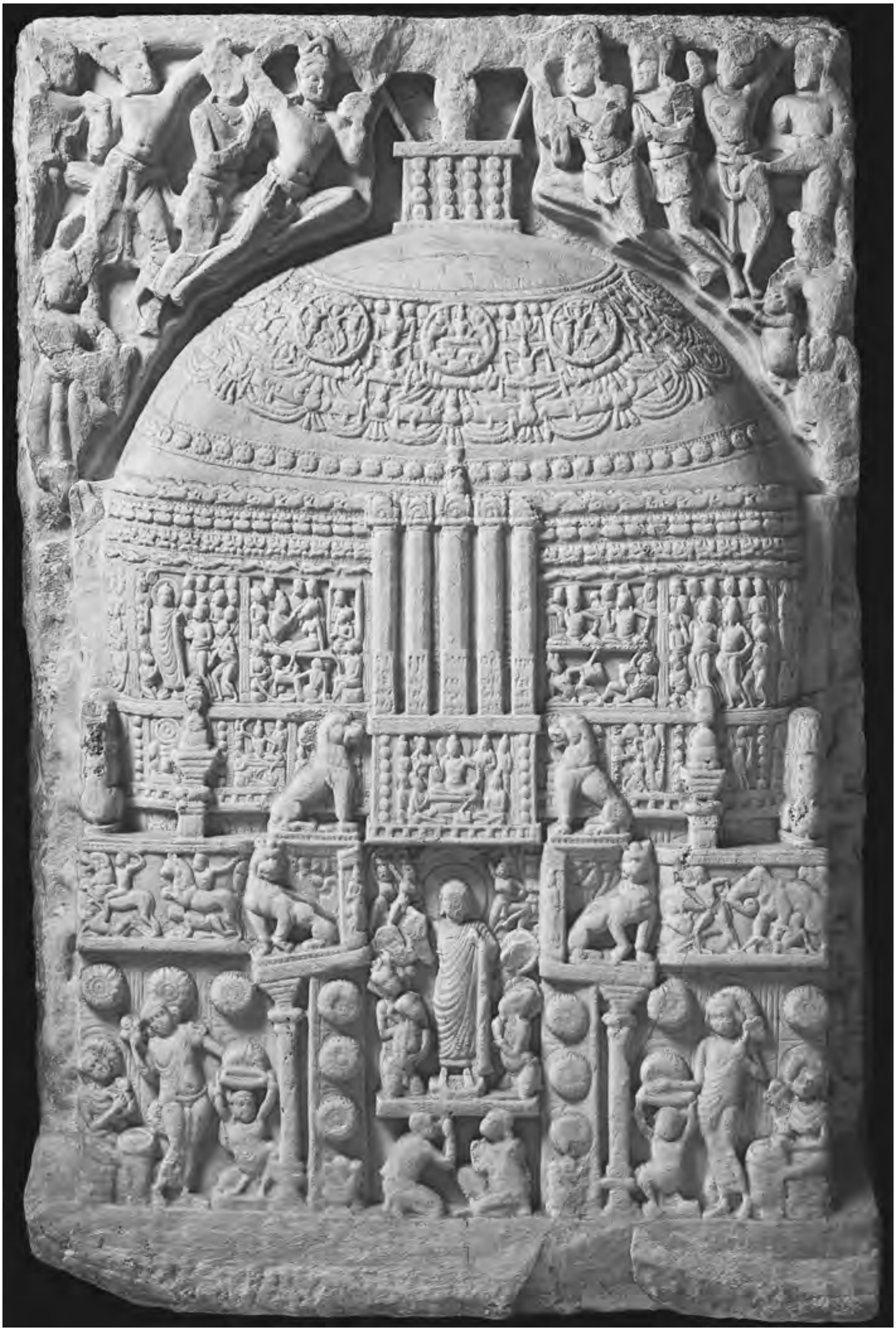


FIGURE 35. Amaravati Drum Slab, Amaravati, Andhra Pradesh, 3rd century CE. British Museum, London (1880.0709.70). Photo copyright © the Trustees of the British Museum.

its purpose. "After I have attained to parinirvana," he tells the image, "you will serve as a pattern to the four classes of my disciples."[15] And so, subsequent images of the Buddha Shakyamuni follow the "pattern" of this ur-image. This is the story Faxian, the Buddhist pilgrim from China, was told in the early fifth-century CE, when he visited the Jetavana monastery.

The artistic patterns followed by sculptors creating the earliest extant images, however, had other sources. These differed in the two Kushana centers where Buddhist imagery developed, Mathura and Gandhara, more or less simultaneously. A second-century Buddha image produced in Mathura, like the one Bala had shipped downriver to Sarnath, appears similar to the earlier Yaksha image of Manibhadra. Mathura workshops were already fabricating large freestanding statues of earthly deities, and when the order came in to create a large image of the Buddha Shakyamuni, the artisans had a pattern ready. Yaksha and Buddha share the same firm powerful presence of more-than-human beings. It is important to note that the sculptors' treatments of these bodily forms, while anthropomorphic, are not "realistic" in the way Western sculptors often sought to observe and reproduce the appearance of the empirical world. So, too, with the early images of the Jain Tirthankaras. As art historian A. K. Coomaraswamy put it long ago, the sculptural artists of Mathura sought to create not the appearance, but rather the significance of their subjects.[16] It is a conceptual style of religious art.

Artisans working in the Gandhara region followed different patterns. In the standing Shakyamuni from Purushapura, also dated to the mid-second century CE, one can readily see its striking contrast in sculptural style from Bala's Mathura-made Buddha (**Fig. 36**). The artist's treatment of the robe gives its folds more weight and substance, like a Greco-Roman rendering of a toga, very different from the diaphanous garment on the Mathura sculpture. Shakyamuni's eyes here looks downward, open but introspective. The facial expression is soft, welcoming. If Bala's Buddha seeks to convey the powerful charismatic presence of an ideal Buddha, the Gandharan sculptor has attempted to render the physical beauty and meditative calm of the human Shakyamuni.

The contrast between these two icons gives a sense of the broader stylistic differences between the artistic traditions that developed in the two Kushana centers. The art of Mathura grew out of the earlier northern Indian styles of Mauryan and Shunga times. The art of Gandhara, by contrast, was an original synthesis. Earlier art historians sometimes characterized Gandharan art as a provincial Greco-Roman style, but it is more apt to see it as a conscious cosmopolitan style incorporating multiple visual resources: Hellenistic Bactria, Roman provinces, earlier Achaemenid and contemporary Parthian from Iran,

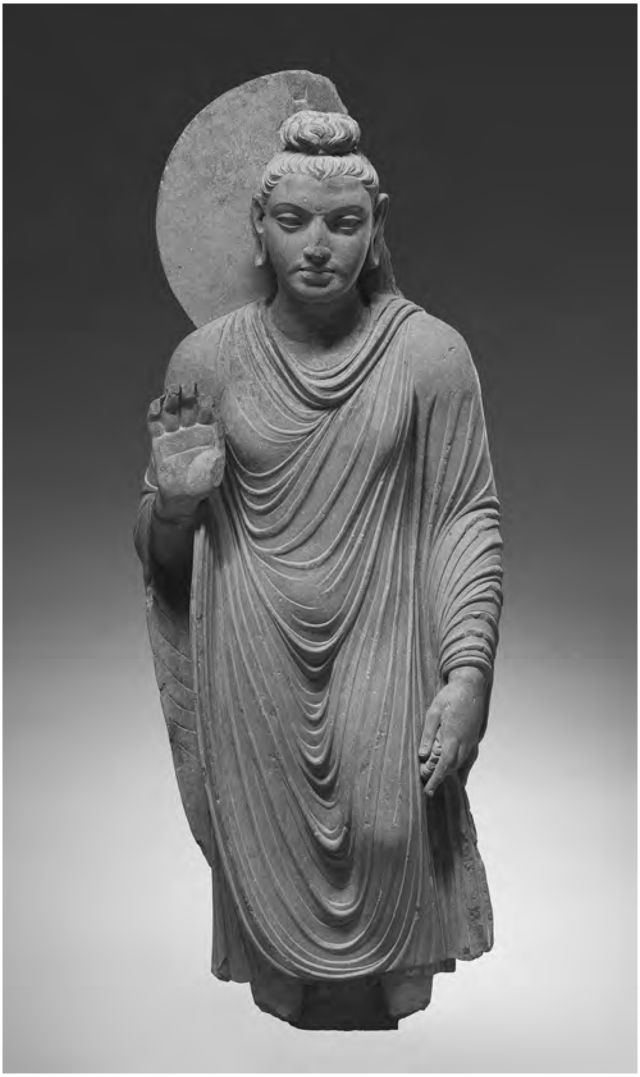


FIGURE 36. Standing Buddha, Gandhara, Pakistan, 150–200 CE. Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of Morris and Eleanor Everett in memory of Flora Morris Everett (1972.43). Photo courtesy of the Cleveland Museum of Art.

and Indian. The Gandhara artisans mingled all these borrowed styles, as Lolita Nehru puts it, with a "local Gandharan conceptual imagination, which absorbed, transformed, or rejected the innumerable stylistic elements present in the Gandharan region to create an independent Gandharan stylistic language."[17]

Hindu Theists: Beginnings of a New Pantheon

In the early centuries CE, Mathura sculptors also created images of divine figures that we now identify as Hindu gods and goddesses. It is important to keep in mind that we are applying the term "Hindu" retrospectively. This term was not in use, and there was not an idea of a single religious culture encompassing these many deities. We should imagine these early deities as centers of their own theistic congregations, such as the Bhagavata devotees of Vishnu, who would gradually be linked together in various ways to form a new Hindu pantheon.

These images are not on the scale or abundance of the dominant Jain and Buddhist images of Kushana times, nor that of the Yaksha and Naga earthly deities. The imagery is experimental, protean, at times indecipherable. As Odette Viennot puts it, "They reveal an iconography in process of formation, still relatively simple but foreshadowing the more complicated forms that were to develop later."[18] The religious cultures centered around these icons, as well as the deities they represented, were at a formative stage. But among the early Mathura images, we can recognize the Vedic fire god Agni, the sun god Surya, Balarama, Skanda Karttikeya, the goddesses Durga and Lakshmi, and the two gods who would become preeminent in early medieval Hindu theism, Vishnu and Shiva. We will focus here on Kushana Era images of goddesses and of the synthetic deity Vishnu/Krishna/Narayana.

In the Mathura Museum, several small stone images depict a female warrior figure in a violent act of killing a buffalo. These are small in scale, less than a foot high, but remarkable in composition. In contrast to the static standing or meditating Jinas or the Buddhas, this goddess engages powerfully in action (**Fig. 37**). She stands firmly on two feet, looming over her adversary. With two of her arms she forces the head of the buffalo back and presses down on its spine. The front legs of the buffalo are lifted off the ground by the force of her grip, and its horns are bent back onto its flank. Despite the violence of her action, the female looks ahead with a mild expression, seemingly unperturbed. She has two more arms: one holds a trident while the weapon in the other is unclear. Here is another key difference. In contrast to the human, two-armed statues of Jinas and the Buddha, this goddess has more than the ordinary human allotment. Art historian Doris Srinivasan calls this the "multiplicity convention": gods and goddesses are depicted with many arms, many heads, or other more-than-human endowments to convey their superhuman powers.[19]

We have seen already the proliferation of "little goddess" images in terracotta, widely distributed in the Shunga Era over northern India. Those were produced

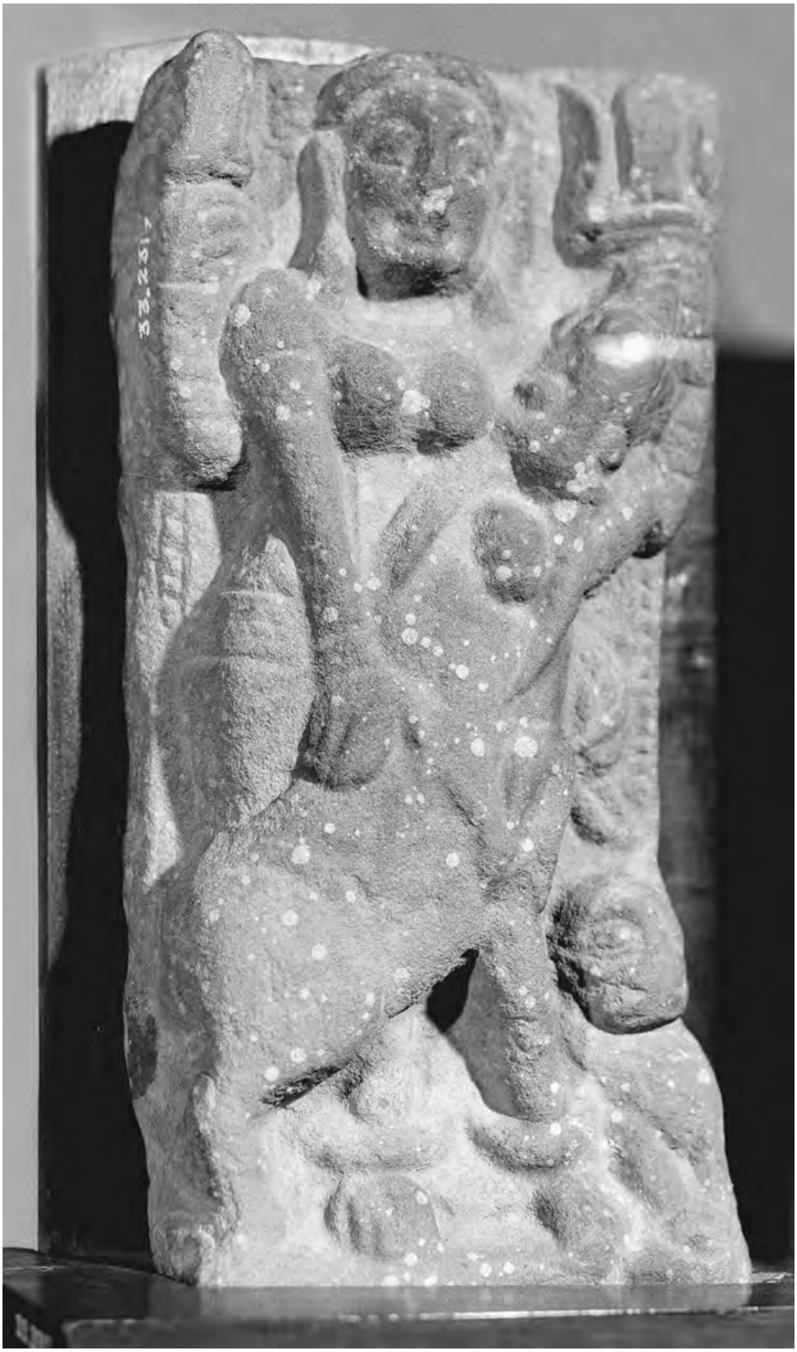


FIGURE 37. Goddess Slaying Buffalo, Mathura, mid-1st to mid-3rd century CE. Archaeological Museum, Mathura, Uttar Pradesh. Photo by John C. Huntington. Courtesy of the John C. and Susan L. Huntington Photographic Archive of Buddhist and Asian Art.

in Mathura as well. Some of these little goddesses wear weapons as hair-pieces. But here a militant goddess takes on a more precise shape. She is a multiarmed warrior goddess who subdues a once-ferocious buffalo. The Mathura images are early representations of the goddess we identify as Durga Mahishasuramardini, the one who "kills the buffalo-demon." The origin of this very big goddess is fully told first in the *Devi Mahatmya* ("Greatness of the Goddess"), part of the *Markandeya Purana*, a work composed around the sixth century CE, long after the Kushana Era. (I discuss this key text in a later chapter.) We have to presume that the story of a buffalo-killing goddess told in that text had circulated in unrecorded oral forms much earlier, and that those oral legends accompanied and informed her Kushana Era images. Here, as often in Indian religious history, the artistic or archeological evidence predates the existing written textual accounts.

Other goddesses also take on more definite identities during the Kushana Era. There are images of Hariti, a Yakshi-like goddess, both fearsome and protective, who has the power to afflict children with smallpox. In Buddhist texts, Hariti must be propitiated by sacrificing children. The Buddha, of course, is able to arouse in her empathy for the suffering she causes others, and Hariti becomes a follower. Religious boundaries in early India are porous, especially when it comes to female deities, and Hariti appears among multiple religious cultures in classical times.

This is even more true of the goddess Shri, or Lakshmi. The term *shri* denotes abundance and prosperity, and this auspicious and fecund goddess receives praise in some Vedic works, such as the *Shri-sukta*. She comes to be associated especially with other signs of fertility and growth: the lotus and the elephant. She stands on a lotus or holds lotuses in her hands. Elephants shower water on her with their trunks, like a royal abhisheka consecration. Lakshmi is closely associated with kingship, and the local rulers of Mathura prior to the Kushanas stamped images of Lakshmi on their coins. She brings her auspicious presence to both Jain and Buddhist settings. On one of the Sanchi gateways, we see Lakshmi gracefully seated on a lotus, lustrated by two elephants also standing on lotuses, situated in a shrine-like setting, an integral part of the broader Buddhist world depicted on the gateways (**Fig. 38**). And within the developing Hindu pantheon, she develops a close relationship with the rising god Vishnu, as his spouse or consort. In the origin story of the churning of the ocean, as told in the *Mahabharata* and many other sources, Lakshmi emerges clothed in white robes, along with many other extraordinary emanations from the agitated milk-ocean. The auspicious goddess is quickly attracted to Vishnu, the most potent of the gods at the great creative event.

As for Vishnu himself, images from Kushana-Era Mathura reflect the ongoing synthesis of several distinct figures into the complex divine identity of Vishnu. In

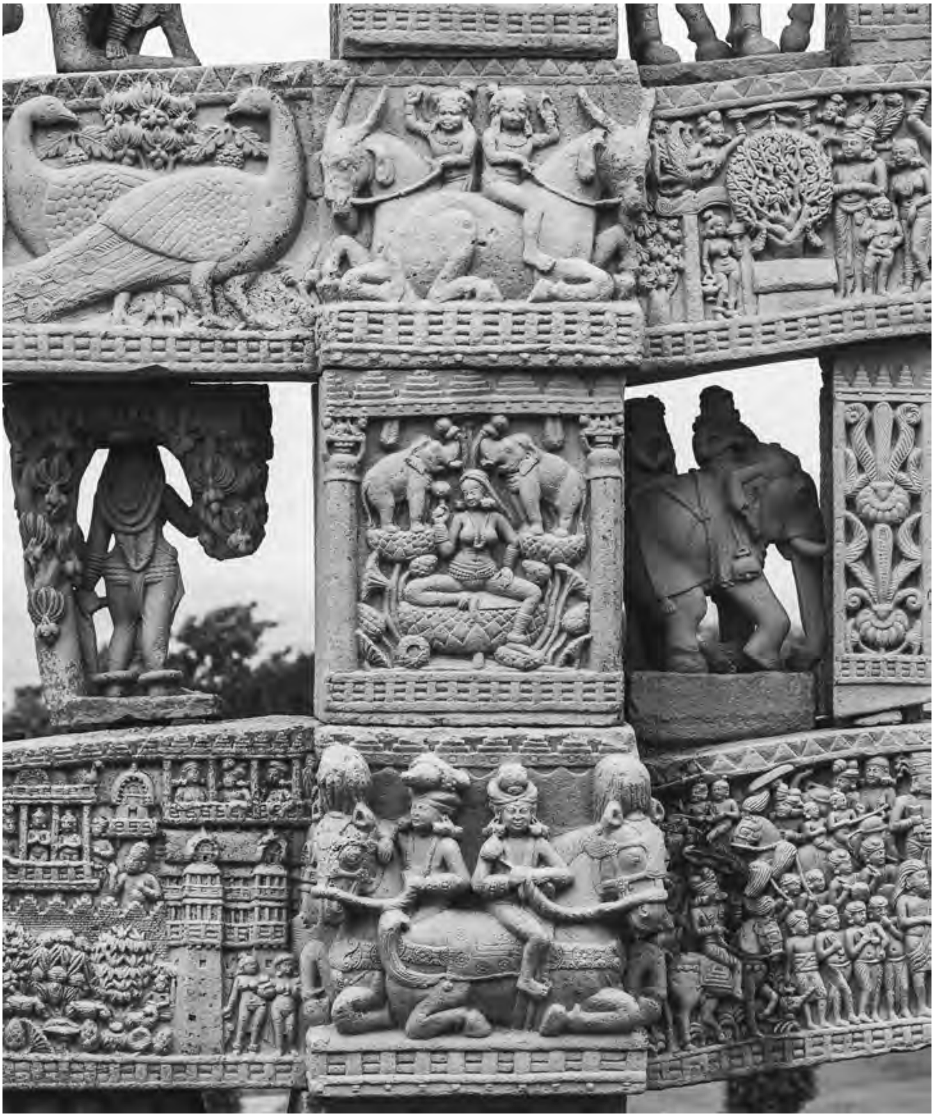


FIGURE 38. Shri Lakshmi, with elephants, Sanchi Gateway relief sculpture, 1st century CE.

the *Ramayana*, Brahman's explanation of Rama's identity provides one example of the template for the new Vaishnava theology. As the god Brahman clarifies, the hero Rama is actually an incarnation of the god Vishnu, embodied in a human form to carry out a crucial task necessary to preserve the world order. Brahman portrays Vishnu as the Supreme Deity, who can also manifest himself in various living bodies—zoomorphic or anthropomorphic—as required in support of Dharma. This conception of an encompassing multiform Highest Being enabled the Vaishnavas to incorporate other figures as aspects, emanations, or incarnations of the single Vishnu. A local legendary hero like Rama of Ayodhya could be reidentified as an incarnation of Vishnu, as Valmiki has the god Brahman do. So it happened also with the cowherd-hero of the Mathura area, Krishna Vasudeva.

In Mathura, sculptors produced images that represented three primary streams in this Vaishnava synthesis: Vishnu incarnations, Narayana, and Krishna Vasudeva.[20]

Several small images depict incarnations of Vishnu in forms known from earlier Vedic accounts. There is Vishnu as Trivikrama, the lord who takes three great steps encompassing the entire cosmos. Vishnu also takes on the form of a giant boar, Varaha, who plunges down and rescues earth from sinking in the ocean. Vishnu's incarnation as Hayagriva, with the head of a horse, is also associated with the preservation of the Vedas.

Distinct from these, and much more imposing, is a remarkable statue of a human figure, some eight feet tall, identified as Narayana. This bearded ascetic wears a grass dhoti, and an antelope hide drapes over one shoulder. He is adorned with the sacred thread of a Vedic initiate, and he holds in his two hands a waterpot and a rosary. Narayana appears as an ideal human Brahmin ascetic, closely aligned with the religious culture of the Vedas.

Much more common than Vishnu or Narayana during this period were images of Krishna Vasudeva, a legendary local Mathura hero. In Kushana-period sculpture, Krishna appears both as one in a group of "Vrishni heroes," or by himself. Most often, Krishna stands firmly alone, with four arms holding such implements as a mace, a discus, or a conch—all of which are associated with battle. From the proliferation of his icons, it is clear that Krishna Vasudeva enjoyed a significant following as a deified local hero among the Bhagavata community in Mathura during the Kushana period. At the same time, this local god was coming to be identified, in Sanskrit works like the *Mahabharata* and the *Harivamsha*, as one among several incarnations of the pan-Indian High God Vishnu Narayana.

Protocols of Image Worship (*Puja*)

So far in this chapter I have been using three English words to denote what are, in material fact, the same objects: statue, image, and icon. They connote different dimensions of these objects, however. "Statue," from a Latin word meaning "to set up," points to the object as something fabricated, a work of human sculpture. ("Statue" is derived from the Indo-European root **sta*, to stand, which appears in Sanskrit terms such as *pratishtha*, the ritual that "sets up" or establishes a statue for worship.) "Image" comes from the Latin *imago*, an imitation or likeness. It points to the resemblance of a fabricated statue to its prototype, which may be a living being like the Buddha Shakyamuni or an envisioned one like the goddess Durga. The artist can choose to imitate the empirical or visual properties of that prototype, or to render its conceptual qualities, its ideal form, as Mathura artists most often did in their images of Buddhas and Tirthankaras. "Icon," from the Greek *eikon*, also denotes an image or representation, but in Christian usage the word has often referred specifically to images of sacred persons that were intended for veneration or devotion. Thus, I use icon to refer to the statue or image as a site for devotees to display or express their veneration toward the being it represents.

Sanskrit works from classical India also use several distinct terms to refer to this category of objects. The term *pratima* (likeness), for example, points to the object as an imitation or reflection of the sacred being, while *archa* (to be honored) refers to the same object as recipient of worship. Another common term for such statues is *murti* (body). Indian religious statues often take the visible shape of bodies, often idealized or enhanced with additional limbs. This term also suggests that the statue can be seen as a physical form or bodily support for a divine presence, much as a soul is thought to enter into and enliven a body. This raises a key question: What exactly is the relationship between the image and entity it represents, the signifier and the signified?

While the religious communities of Kushana-Era Mathura embraced the use of icons, they adopted different positions on this issue. The non-theistic Jains maintained a firm distinction between signifier and signified. Tirthankaras like Mahavira do not enter into images. As liberated beings they reside eternally in a special realm of the full accomplished, at the very top of the cosmos, and do not budge from that blissful place. Therefore, an image of Mahavira is an "absent Lord," as anthropologist Alan Babb aptly puts it: a representation or mirror of the perfect virtues that had enabled Mahavira to escape the bondage of worldly life. But the image is not a support for any divine presence.[21] The theistic Bhagavata votaries of Vishnu and Krishna, by contrast, considered that their god does indeed become present in icons. The signified permeates the signifier. Just as Vishnu becomes incarnated in human forms like Rama and Krishna, so that god could also become manifest in physical images. Later Vaishnava theologians even classified sacred images of Vishnu as a special category of incarnation, an "incarnation for worship" (*archa-avatara*).

Honor and Puja

Whether they considered an image to be a representation of an eminent being of perfect virtue, as the Jains did, or as a bodily support for divine presence, as with the Vaishnava Bhagavatas, Indian religious cultures held their icons as worthy of honor or veneration. In this sense, statues became part of a broader cultural discourse of honoring.

In his reflections on "memorial art," philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff discusses the "social practice of paying honor to persons or events."[22] To honor someone or something involves first of all a selection of that recipient as worthy of receiving honor. For a preliminary example, Wolterstorff describes a high school that institutes an "honor roll" to commend students for their academic achievement. The process of selection requires some criterion, such as a student's excellent grades. To honor someone or something requires doing something that counts as paying honor, according to some shared convention. In the simple case of the high school honor roll, this might take the form of a posting of names of honorees in a newspaper or on a school website, or a public announcement at a graduation ceremony. Actions that count as paying honor can be highly diverse. But they must be recognized as honoring actions within a particular cultural context. Wolterstorff observes that there has to be some fittingness that makes the honoring action appropriate to conveying honor. Further, there are some widely shared patterns of fittingness. "There is something about the bodily gestures of kneeling or bowing before someone that makes these actions befit the action of paying honor to that person; hence it is that those ways of paying honor are to be found in a wide range of societies," Wolterstorff observes. "There is something about the action of spitting in someone's face that makes it decidedly unfitting for paying honor to that person."[23]

In Indian religious discourse, the term *puja* (most often translated as "worship") refers broadly to the action of paying honor to some worthy recipient. These recipients may be Vedic gods, earthly deities like Yakshas or Nagas, Hindu deities like Durga or Vishnu, or highly accomplished religious teachers like Mahavira or the Buddha Shakyamuni. Recipients of honor could also include respected religious specialists, such as Veda-knowing Smarta Brahmins, ascetics, yogis, or mendicant monks and nuns of the Jain and Buddhist communities. They can be honored for their piety, their disciplined self-mastery, and their moral conduct. Of course, different communities might extol particular recipients as specially worthy of honor. Dharmasutra works proclaim Brahmin householders as most entitled to being honored, while the Buddhist texts stress that lay followers should show honor chiefly to Buddhist monks and nuns. With the embrace of the icon across Indian religious communities, religious images were also taken as worthy recipients of honor, since to some degree or another, an image reflected or participated in the sacred being it represented. To show honor to a statue like Bala's Buddha was a way of honoring the Buddha himself.

Worshipping an image drew on the same lexicon of actions considered fitting to honor a worthy person or a god in early India. These actions begin with bodily gestures. Most common of these are folding one's hands in front of the heart and bowing the head. More dramatically one might prostrate one's entire body before a recipient of honor. Also prevalent in all Indian religious settings is circumambulation (*pradakshina*), walking around the honored being while keeping it always to one's right side. One may present material offerings to the recipient. Often these follow the pattern of attending to a respected guest. Flowers, incense, and unguents—substances pleasing to the senses—are frequent offerings. One may present water for sipping and bathing. One may present food as a form of honor. One may give clothing to the recipient and, in some cases, ornaments and adornments. Actions of puja also include performances meant to please the honoree: verbal utterances of respect, hymns of praise, and celebratory music and dance. Finally, some honoring actions acknowledge the lordly status of the recipient. Placing crowns, raising parasols, and waving yak-tail fans are ways of showing respect to kings, and those actions are also suited within many religious contexts. All these physical acts of veneration contribute the basic ritual vocabulary in Indic protocols of image worship.

Guides for the Worship of Images

The earliest practices of image worship in Kushana-Era India, we have to postulate, were informal adaptations of existing practices of honoring. New icons of Vishnu or Durga might be honored much as earthly deities like Yakshas and Yakshis had been. Bala's Buddha would be celebrated with the same kinds of honors offered to the Buddha Shakyamuni during his lifetime, and later to a stupa animated by the Buddha's relics. But with the large-scale embrace of icons in the early centuries CE, religious specialists began to set forth more formal protocols for the worship of religious icons.

Among the earliest extant Indic works setting out guides for image worship were "additions" or "supplements" (*parishishta*) to the domestic Grihyasutras of Smarta Brahmin communities. The earlier Grihyasutras, composed before the

Common Era, had recognized the existence of *devagaras*, "homes of the gods." These texts had recommended that their audience of Smarta Brahmins show respect to a god's shrine, but they should not participate directly in its ritual practices. In the early centuries CE, however, some branches of these Vedic shakhas, while still loyal to their Vedic training and culture, brought their ritual expertise to the emerging religious culture around Hindu deities and their icons.[24] They incorporated image worship as part of their own domestic observances, and they also developed prescriptive guides that could be used in public shrines housing icons. They added these new image-related rites as appendices to their existing Grihya texts.

Not all Vedic or Smarta Brahmins followed this path. There was no wholesale abandonment of loyalty to the Vedas. Some branches of Smarta Brahmins remained strongly committed to aniconic Vedic sacrificial practices. Several of the most prominent Smarta works on Dharma during the early centuries CE, like the Dharmashastras of Manu and Yajnavalkya, strongly discourage Brahmins from having anything to do with any homes of the gods. A split developed within the community of Smarta Brahmins between "iconodules" and "iconophobes," those Brahmins who participated in the culture of image worship and those who disdained it. This division, argues Ronald Inden, was "the result of contestation among different religious orders or schools for the 'enunciative function' with respect to the religious or ontological commitments of ancient Indian polities."[25] One Smarta branch that allied itself with the new practices of image worship was the Baudhayana shakha.

The Baudhayana school affiliated itself with the Taittiriya recension of the Black Yajur Veda. Brahmins of this shakha maintained and transmitted, in addition to their primary Veda, a full array of ancillary Smarta works: Shrautasutra, Dharmasutra, and Grihyasutra. As in other Smarta schools, the Baudhayana Grihyasutra remained open to supplements or appendices, which enabled the school to address and incorporate new ritual practices. Composed in the early centuries CE, the *Baudhayana Grihya Parishishta Sutra* (or the "Supplemental Sutra for the Domestic Rites of the Baudhayana School") contains the most complete early treatment of Hindu image worship. It sets out protocols for the establishment and worship of an image of Vishnu, and also for images of Mahadeva Shiva, Vinayaka Ganesha, and a series of goddesses including Durga, Shri, Sarasvati, Jyeshtha, and Upashruti (also identified as Ratri, the "Goddess Night"). The Baudhayana school clearly holds Vishnu as the highest being, the Mahapurusha, but it recognizes other deities in the emerging Hindu pantheon as also worthy of honor.

The *Parishishta* provides a model for the two key rites in the liturgy of image worship. The first, *pratishtha* or "establishment," consecrates a human-made statue as worthy for ritual use. It enhances the physical nature of the object, allowing it to become a support or body for divine presence. It transforms the image into an icon. The second, *puja*, brings together the worshipper and the consecrated divine icon so that the worshipper can honor the god with a series of suitable actions and offerings. According to this Smarta Brahmin work, these two rituals require an officiant knowledgeable in the Vedas, since each action is accompanied by the recitation of Vedic hymns. The actions also include a Vedic fire sacrifice and the feeding of Brahmins. This work clearly seeks to establish a continuity between the older Vedic sacrificial tradition and the new practices of worshipping Hindu deities in image form. It also continues the Vedic legacy of social exclusion by prohibiting women and members of the Shudra class from these rites.

To establish an image, the officiant first purifies the physical object, places it on a platform, and repeatedly pours liquid substances over it: the five products of the cow (cow urine, dung, milk, curd, and ghee), water with bark of various trees, and then a liquid containing pearls, jewels, silver, and copper. This abhisheka, or "affusion," of the statue is a constitutive ritual action. It infuses powers into the image, just as a royal abhisheka infuses ruling powers into a newly consecrated king. Once the image has been empowered, the priest uses a golden needle to open its eyes. This is understood as a key moment in the ritual, the point when the material statue becomes fully alive. Then the officiant sets up a Vedic sacrificial fire and recites the hymn to Purusha while offering oblations into the fire. He touches the image at its feet, its navel, its head, and then its entire body, each time reciting the Purusha hymn. Through these recitations the priest identifies the god Vishnu as the Primordial Being and original sacrificial victim celebrated by the Vedic hymn and transforms the Vishnu image into its embodiment. If the Purusha hymn narrates a sacrificial dismemberment of the Purusha to create the myriad phenomena of the existing world, here the ritual establishment returns those materials of the created world to empower the new image body of Vishnu, the new Primordial Being.

Once this initial consecration of the icon has been completed, the officiant should take the image into its proper shrine, the home of the god, and honor it with its first puja worship. First the priest must ensure that the god Vishnu is present within the image-body. To invoke (*avahana*) the god, he recites a series of Vedic mantras and ends each with the phrase, "I invoke the Purusha." Once Vishnu has, in effect, arrived in the icon, the officiant honors the god with the same ritual etiquette that one would offer to a worthy Brahmin guest (*atithi-puja*). He bows to the god and gives him a seat of kusha grass, water to wash his feet, holy water, and water to sip. With each presentation, the officiant humbly requests that his offering be accepted. Then he seeks to please his divine guest still more. He presents to the Vishnu image sweet-smelling perfume, a garland, flowers, incense, and the illumination of a lamp. As he gives flowers, he pronounces the twelve names of Vishnu. He presents food to the divine image, a meal of different preparations of rice, milk, ghee, and other edibles, just as one would feed a Brahmin guest at a household ceremony.

But the Vishnu present in the image is not just any guest. The ceremony of honoring Vishnu in the icon ends with a Vedic fire sacrifice and a prayer that conveys its larger dimensions.

> You are the One, the First, the Purusha, the Ancient One. We offer sacrifice to you, Narayana, the creator of everything. You are the sacrifice, those performed in the past and those performed in the future. Accept this oblation of yourself, by yourself. (BGPS 2.13)

For the Baudhayana school, Vishnu Narayana has been identified as the Highest Being, the Vedic Purusha. He is the sacrificial fire, the recipient of sacrificial offerings, and also (as the emanating source of material being) the substances that are offered into the fire. In this ritual puja, the god is present both in the image and in the sacrificial fire. At the conclusion of the ceremony the officiant circumambulates these two manifestations of Vishnu, proclaiming his honors.

In Hindu theism, puja—the honoring of gods and goddesses made present in the form of images or icons—is the fundamental ritual practice. It is as central to Hindu religious culture as fire-sacrifice (*yajna*) was to earlier Vedic religion. The early formalization of puja by the Baudhayana school, a Smarta Brahmin community that adopted image worship, illustrates the basic pattern. A worshipper approaches the image in a personal state of purity. One then invokes the god or goddess into the properly consecrated icon. Once the deity is present, the worshipper honors it with a sequence of fitting actions (*upacharas* or "services"): bodily gestures, material offerings, and verbal praises. Each act may be accompanied by a suitable recitation or mantra that gives it added power. Praises and prayers are recited to please the deity, and they also articulate the full dimensions of the divine person being honored. This ritual pattern has been adapted with numerous variations from the Kushana Era among different Hindu communities. For example, the Smarta Baudhayana school foregrounded recitations from the Vedas as part of puja, but many later Hindu groups employed non-Vedic mantras within their worship practices. These later mantras are loosely termed "Tantric."

Hindu theists assert that the divine being becomes present or manifest in the image during puja. Vishnu enters his icon incarnation, as a later Vaishnava school terms it, just as he incarnates himself in human forms such as Rama and Krishna. But the ritual of puja does not require a theology of divine presence. The non-theistic Jains developed similar practices of honoring images of Mahavira and other Tirthankaras, but without any theophany. They understood their practice of puja not as a transaction between worshipper and divine person, but as the worshiper's self-reflexive act of austerity or meditation. The Jain worshipper "gives up" material offerings, rather than "giving" them to the Jina, since the Jina is not present and in any case does not need or want anything.

The *Rajaprashniya Sutra*, a Jain work of the late third century CE, provides one of the earliest accounts of Jain image worship.[26] Rather than setting out rules of conduct (*vidhi*), as the Baudhayana school does, the Jain text describes an exemplary ritual carried out by a god. The sun god Surya visits a temple and worships the images of the Jinas there. In Jain narratives, Vedic gods like Surya and Indra are wise enough to recognize the superior eminence of the fully realized Tirthankaras and to honor them and their images accordingly. Here, Surya washes himself to assure purity and then goes into the temple with his retinue of gods and goddesses. He bows to the Jina images and then honors them. He fans them with a peacock-feather fan. After washing the images with scented water, Surya dabs them with sandalwood paste and rubs them with a scented cloth. He dresses the images with clothing suitable for gods and offers flowers, garlands, incense, scented powder, cloth, and ornaments. He places long garlands on the images. He also decorates the area surrounding the images. He holds up representations of the eight holy objects (*maṅgala*). He offers unbroken rice to them. To conclude, the god Surya sings a hymn of praise to the Jinas.

A Jain worshipper, following this paradigmatic account, might imagine himself or herself as a god—commonly Indra for males and Indrani for females—honoring an image of the Jain tirthankara. Even the gods recognize the superior valor of the Jinas. But those Jinas do not enter into the icons that represent them. The Jain ethos places greatest value on the acts of renouncing and emulating performed by the worshipper during puja. A worshipper of Vishnu, by contrast, might imagine the icon to be infused with the real presence of the god. Early Bhagavata Vaishnava works encouraged the image-worshipping follower to place himself or herself in a personalized relationship with the deity. This devotional religious sensibility was spelled out in works of the period centered on the Vishnu incarnation Krishna.

Krishna and the Discipline of Devotion

On the battlefield of Kurukshetra, according to the *Mahabharata*, the charioteer Krishna offers the Pandava warrior Arjuna a piece of religious advice:

> If someone presents a leaf, a flower, a piece of fruit, or water to Me, with devotion (*bhakti*), I accept that offering of devotion from its donor. Therefore, Arjuna, whenever you act, make an offering, sacrifice, donate something, or undertake an ascetic penance, do it as an offering to Me, and you will be freed from the bondage of your action, whether good or bad results. (MBh 6.31.27-28, BhG 9.27-28)

Krishna presents himself to Arjuna here as the Highest God and suggests to him that any ritual action, even the most modest act of honoring, can be fitting and efficacious—if it is done with the proper recognition and discipline of devotion. He offers a different perspective on the worship of images as well as on sacrifice. Works like the *Baudhayana Grihya Parishishta Sutra* set out procedures for the physical actions of worship. With Bhakti, the emphasis is not on the action itself, but on the mentality or state of mind with which the action is undertaken.

Bhakti becomes a bright thread in the fabric of Indic religious cultures. The term derives from the verb root *bhaj*, meaning both to apportion out and to receive a portion or share. In its earliest usage, in the Vedas, the verb often refers to the dividing and distributing shares in the sacrificial offerings. In receiving a sacrificial portion, one becomes a participant in a community of sharers, and one also receives something to eat. From this liturgical reference, the verb "bhaj" takes on various secular meanings, such as to grant or supply something, to enjoy something (including sexual intercourse), and to pursue or cultivate. Bhaj can mean to choose or declare one's attachment to another. In works of the Kushana Era, Bhakti takes on a new theistic meaning. The most common English translation is "devotion," but the semantic range of religious Bhakti is much broader. Bhakti conveys the personal commitment and often the strong emotional attachment of a votary to a divine figure, a god or a goddess.

This kind of religious sensibility appears among Jains and Buddhists, certainly, and it was no doubt an aspect of the worship practices directed toward earthly deities like Yakshas and Yakshis.[27] But Bhakti receives its earliest textual articulation in early works of the Bhagavata Vaishnava school dedicated to the god Krishna, particularly in the *Harivamsha* and the *Bhagavad Gita*. The *Harivamsha* tells the story of Krishna Vasudeva as he grows up among a tribe of cowherders, a lovable local hero who is at the same time an incarnation of the highest god Vishnu. And in the *Bhagavad Gita*, an eighteen-chapter section of the *Mahabharata*, the adult Krishna spells out for Arjuna what he calls Bhakti-yoga, a religious discipline (Yoga) fully equal to if not superior to any other religious practice.

Krishna among the Cowherds

In the story of the *Mahabharata*, Krishna is an intriguing and mysterious character. He is the ruler of the clan of Vrishnis, whose capital is in Dvaraka. He is related to the Pandavas, and over time he becomes a special friend to Yudhishthira and Arjuna. Yet there is more to him than meets the eye. Some characters, at certain times, are aware of a godly quality in Krishna. Most of the time, however, his divine character remains hidden.

Some characters in the *Mahabharata* speak of Krishna's lowly status and questionable background. At Yudhishthira's royal consecration, when the Pandavas propose to honor Krishna as the chief guest at the ceremony, the Chedi ruler Shishupala rises to object vehemently (MBh 2.33-42). Krishna is no legitimate king at all, he charges. Krishna usurped and murdered the rightful king of Mathura, Kamsa. Krishna was not raised as a Kshatriya, but among a humble tribe of cowherders. Shishupala goes on to belittle the feats he performed among his pastoral tribe. Krishna is a cow killer and woman killer—how can the Pandavas stoop to honor such a questionable prince? Shishupala's outburst throws the royal ceremony into tumult. Many agree with Shishupala's assessment; others disagree passionately. Fights break out in the royal assembly hall. Finally Shishupala challenges Krishna one too many times. Krishna quickly severs Shishupala's head with his razor-sharp discus. This may solve the immediate issue, but questions about Krishna's identity remain throughout the epic story.

Listening to Vaishampayana's complicated recitation of the *Mahabharata*, the royal interlocutor Janamejaya is also perplexed. After the epic of the Bharatas is completed, Janamejaya asks for further clarification about Krishna and his tribe. And the indefatigable Vaishampayana responds with a detailed *Harivamsha* or "lineage of Krishna." The *Harivamsha* forms a 16,000-verse appendix (*khila*) to the already immense *Mahabharata*. Scholars place the composition of this appendix in Kushana-Era Mathura, probably around the second century CE.[28] In it, Vaishampayana answers Janamejaya's request by narrating Krishna's life prior to his adult appearance in the *Mahabharata*. Krishna did indeed grow up among a nomadic tribe of cowherders, as Shishupala charged, and he did kill King Kamsa, the ruler of Mathura. But to place that in perspective, Vaishampayana first sets out the larger stakes. Krishna was divine and Kamsa was a demonic tyrant.

To explain Krishna's role on earth, Vaishampayana articulates a Bhagavata theology centered on Vishnu, in which Krishna Vasudeva figures as one in a series of incarnations. In fact, says Vaishampayana, "there have already been many thousands of manifestations of Vishnu . . . and the god Brahman says there will be many more in the future" (HV 31.10-11). Vaishampayana goes on to describe nine of Vishnu's most noteworthy incarnations, such as his Boar and Dwarf forms. Rama, son of Dasharatha, is another incarnation, "to bring favor to the world, to defeat demons, and to increase Dharma" (HV 31.112). Vaishampayana adds an important point to his account of these incarnations. During all his earth-preserving, demon-destroying activity, Vishnu remains transcendent, mysteriously aloof. "This pervasive Lord remains unmanifest, even when he is in a manifest form, because Vishnu Narayana is endless, the unchanging source of all" (HV 32.3).

As Vishnu is about to incarnate himself as Krishna Vasudeva, the god Brahman gives him some instructions. He will be a god in human form, and though born to Kshatriya parents, he will grow up—concealed for his own protection—in a foster-tribe of nomadic cowherds. Initially his powers will be constrained within his human body. "At first," says Brahman, "you will be just a child there, with all the characteristics of a cowherd. But then you will grow, just as you did once before when you took those three steps in your Dwarf incarnation" (HV 45.39). As he grows, Krishna will have two primary tasks. He will protect the cowherd tribe from demonic threats and ultimately overthrow Kamsa, the usurper ruling Mathura. Second, he will involve himself in the great battle between the Pandavas and the Kauravas.

But there is one more thing Krishna should do while living among the cowherds. He should charm them. As Brahman advises Vishnu:

> Roam the lands, bringing delight to thousands of cowherd women. Fortunate indeed are the women who see your human body, Vishnu, adorned with garlands of forest flowers, when you run around the woods protecting the cows . . . When you go to live among the cowherds, the world will become young again. When you are driving the cattle to the forest, when you are running around in the cow pens, and when you are bathing in the Yamuna River, your devotees will follow their hearts' desires and fall in love with you. (HV 45.40-43)

Even though they do not recognize Krishna's divine nature, the cowherds will form a powerful emotional attachment with Vishnu's human incarnation. The fervent love felt toward Krishna, first exemplified by the women of the cowherd tribe, will be a central feature in the later development of Bhakti, Hindu devotional religion.

From the beginning of Krishna's life among the cowherds, inexplicable things happen—inexplicable at least to the eyes of the cowherds. Baby Krishna, crying for his mother's milk, kicks over a large wooden cart laden with earthenware pots. A demonic bird tries to poison the infant and instead has its breast bitten off and its life sucked out. When Krishna's mother ties the rambunctious crawling child to a heavy wooden mortar, he drags the mortar between two trees and topples them. The tribe is dumbfounded by these prodigies. As a youngster, Krishna defeats a series of threats to the cattle herds: a wild donkey, a frenzied bull, an unruly horse, a poisonous snake polluting the river. Only gradually do the cowherds begin to apprehend that Krishna is a special being. Finally, when young Krishna holds up a mountain as a giant umbrella to shelter the cows and the herders from a deluge sent by the Vedic god Indra, the cowherders recognize that this adopted member of their tribe is a being of superhuman capacities. But what kind of being, they ask him:

> Now we have seen your superhuman actions. Because you held up the mountain, we recognize that you, Krishna, are imperishable. But who are you, strong one? Are you one of the Vedic Rudras, the Maruts, the Vasus? What is your aim here? . . . You play childhood games in the forest, Krishna, and your birth here among us is a lowly one. But your actions are those of a god. We have doubts in our minds. Why are you playing here among us in this lowly state, in the guise of a cowherd? Why are you protecting the cows, when you look like a World-Guardian? But whether you are a god, a demon, an earthly Yaksha, or a celestial Gandharva who has been our relative—no matter who you are, we honor you. (HV 63.4-8)

In their struggle to understand this extraordinary being, the cowherds postulate various categories of gods and other superhuman beings, but they fail to consider that he might be an incarnation of Vishnu, the highest of all gods, dwelling among them. And Krishna does not enlighten them. "I am not to be known as you are thinking of me," he responds. "I am your relative, born in your community. If you need to hear more, you must wait for the right time. Then you will hear and see me as I really am" (HV 63.11-12).

The right time never comes for the cowherds in the *Harivamsha.* They never comprehend Krishna in his full divine identity as an incarnation of Krishna. Despite their cognitive failure, the cowherds are nevertheless ennobled by their personal attachment to him. Krishna suggests this in concluding his answer to their inquiry. "I am your relative, whom you praise like a god, and if it pleases me, then what is the point of complete knowledge?" (HV 63.13) The loving relationship the cowherds form with Krishna, treating him as a charming human member of their group, is enough. Their passionate devotion to Krishna, even without full understanding of his divine nature, makes them exemplary Bhaktas.

The story of Krishna raised among cowherds—like the stories of Rama, the Buddha Shakyamuni, and others—comes to be sung and retold in countless ways over succeeding centuries. Krishna's early life as a cowherd boy and hero of the tribe is one of the central narratives for the articulation of devotional religious culture in India.

Young Krishna goes on to defeat the demonic ruler Kamsa and restores the rule of Dharma in Mathura. And as an adult, Krishna becomes an important side-character in the great conflict between the Pandavas and Kauravas, told in the *Mahabharata.* In the battle at Kurukshetra, Krishna serves as the noncombatant charioteer for the Pandava warrior Arjuna, and there the two princes engage in an important dialogue, known as the *Bhagavad Gita.*

Krishna's Teachings at Kurukshetra

The *Bhagavad Gita*, or "Song of the Lord," is by far the best-known portion of the *Mahabharata.*[29] Most scholars hold that it took shape in the early centuries CE, as one of many additions that expanded the protean Shunga Era narrative. The *Gita* addresses some of the core concerns and tensions within the *Mahabharata.* As the translator J. A. B. Van Buitenen sees it, the *Bhagavad Gita* "was conceived and developed to bring to a climax and solution the dharmic dilemma of a war which was both just and pernicious."[30] But it goes beyond the dilemma of Dharma. In the dialogue, Krishna critically reviews many aspects of Indian religious culture of its time and proposes some far-reaching innovations—including an account of Bhakti as a full-fledged religious path.

The *Bhagavad Gita* has its own plot within the overarching plot of the *Mahabharata.* For his entire life, Arjuna has assiduously trained to be the most formidable Kshatriya warrior in the world. The Pandavas' hope for victory over the Kauravas rests on his prowess. But suddenly, arriving on the battlefield, Arjuna suffers from moral quandaries and debilitating anxiety. As he explains to his charioteer Krishna, he sees his kinsmen and his teachers on the opposing side. It cannot be Dharma to kill one's relatives. He is filled with grief and confusion. His mind whirling and his body trembling uncontrollably, Arjuna drops his bow and threatens to renounce the battle altogether. He appeals to Krishna, whom he knows as a friend and savvy adviser. It is up to Krishna to persuade Arjuna to overcome his distress and to fight. The *Bhagavad Gita* unfolds as a dialogue between the two characters, stationed between two great armies poised for battle, with Krishna acting as an increasingly compelling instructor. It culminates with an awesome vision that reveals Krishna's all-encompassing supernal form to Arjuna. And it ends with Arjuna, fully persuaded by Krishna's arguments and his divine revelation, ready to give it his all in the impending war.

A key part of Krishna's argument revolves around issues of action and nonaction. As we have seen, Shramana thinkers had long ago identified desire as an existential problem. Undertaking an action out of desire, they maintained, leads to bondage, and is inimical to the attainment of true freedom and self-mastery. To avoid desire-based action, they advocated renunciation, leaving worldly duties to become a homeless mendicant. Arjuna likewise criticizes the selfish motives that have brought the warriors to this field of battle: desires for victory, kingship, riches, and fame. Like a Shramana, he proposes to carry out his own renunciation, leaving behind his duty as a Kshatriya warrior. To counter Arjuna's threat, Krishna proposes a new theory of action. One should not renounce action itself, he argues, but rather renounce one's attachment to the fruits of action.

> Your obligation is to the action, and never to its fruits. Do not be motivated by the fruit of your action. But do not become attached to nonaction either. Abandon your attachment and engage in worldly action, Arjuna, while standing firm in *yoga* (discipline). Consider success and failure to be equal. This equanimity is called yoga, Arjuna, since the action itself is much less important than the discipline of the mind. (BhG 2.47-49)

Krishna advocates that Arjuna carry out his worldly duty as a Kshatriya warrior, but that he do so with an inner state of equanimity. Krishna urges Arjuna to become a person who is firm in wisdom, a *sthitaprajna*.

How does one attain this kind of equanimity? One should "stand firm in Yoga," says Krishna, using the old term *yoga* in the broad sense of discipline. But this is easier said than done, as Arjuna complains: "This Yoga you promote as equanimity, Krishna, I do not see how it can remain firm, since we are so unstable. The mind is fickle, agitating, powerful, and tough to resist. Krishna, I believe the mind is as difficult to control as the wind" (BhG 6.33-34). Krishna admits that it is difficult, but he insists it can be done. There are in fact many methods to gain self-control. Krishna reviews various disciplinary practices: sacrifice, austerities, breath control, meditation, and philosophical knowledge. All these forms of Yoga can be valuable, he asserts, insofar as they lead one in the direction of inner equanimity.

Of all these methods, though, Krishna suggests that Bhakti or devotion is the best.

> I consider the Bhakti yogin to be superior to ascetics. He is superior to those who practice the discipline of knowledge and he is superior to those who practice the discipline of action. Therefore, Arjuna, be that kind of yogin. I consider the one who faithfully shares (*bhajate*) in Me, and whose innermost self is absorbed in Me, to be the most disciplined of all yogins. (BhG 6.46-47)

But just what does a Bhakti yogin do? As Krishna presents it to Arjuna, this Yoga is not a specific disciplinary action, but a state of mind within which one may engage in other activities. It can transfigure any act. For example, one may offer sacrifice, a discipline of action, but do so in a devotional mode. The sacrificer need only recognize fully that Krishna permeates every element and movement of the sacrifice. "I am the rite, I am the sacrifice, I am the offering, I am the herb, I am the mantra, I am the ghee, I am the fire, I am the oblation," explains Krishna (BhG 9.16), and if one keeps this identity deeply in mind, the sacrificial action is transformed into an act of devotion. Once again, it is not the act itself that is important, but the mentality of the actor.[31] For this reason, one need not have all the wealth required to sponsor a public sacrifice; the humblest objects—a leaf, a flower, fruit, water—can serve just as well. Krishna gives his earlier emphasis on disinterested, selfless action a theistic grounding here. One can abandon one's personal attachment to the fruits of action by redirecting all acts into devotional services toward Krishna. Bhakti provides a new method of cutting away the bondage of action.

Further, the path of Bhakti is open to all. Other paths may be restricted. Members of lower classes and women are excluded from Vedic sacrifice. Those who have transgressed the rules of Dharma are rendered impure and sinful and become ineligible for religiously beneficial rites. Renunciatory orders like the Buddhists and Jains are usually limited to those who have left behind their worldly ties. But these restrictions do not apply when it comes to devotion. "Know this, Arjuna: no devotee of mine is lost," Krishna promises. "Even those of low birth, women, Vaishyas, and Shudras will reach the highest state, if they just take refuge in me" (BhG 9.31-32). The power of Bhakti can also transform past transgressions of Dharma. Even the most wicked offender who devotes himself fully to Krishna will soon become righteous and find permanent peace. Krishna alludes here to the real situation of Arjuna and his ethical qualms about the battle to come. Bhakti offers a way of absolving Arjuna from the dire deeds of a warrior. Even acts of war can be undertaken as a form of devotion to Krishna and thereby be transformed into a discipline of service to the Lord.

Krishna concludes his explication of the path of devotion with an appeal to Arjuna: "Finding yourself in this impermanent and unhappy world, join yourself to Me. Fix your mind on Me, devote yourself to Me, sacrifice to Me, honor Me, and with your self yoked to Me as its highest end, you will come to Me" (BhG 9.33-34).

The discipline of Bhakti requires that a person redirect oneself wholeheartedly toward a single divine figure. Krishna calls upon Arjuna to devote himself to the seemingly human charioteer who has just revealed his divine nature to the warrior. But devotion makes most sense if Krishna is not just any deity. It ought best to go toward the most powerful, the most complete, the Supreme Deity. After stating his preference for the path of Bhakti, Krishna begins to present himself to Arjuna as just such a Supreme Being, first in verbal discourse and then through a visual display of his all-encompassing supernal form. It is first of all a matter of knowledge, Krishna explains.

Krishna explains to Arjuna that he is an incarnation. He is an interventionist God who appears in the world to support Dharma. "Whenever there is a decline in Dharma and an increase in non-Dharma," he tells Arjuna, "then I emanate myself. For the protection of good people, for the destruction of evildoers, and for the restoration of Dharma, I take birth in age after age" (BhG 4.7-8). This fits with Vaishampayana's account in the *Harivamsha*—but here, Krishna focuses more on himself as an incarnation rather than on being an incarnation of Vishnu. There are no limits, Krishna proclaims, to his divine manifestations. He is unborn, eternal, unchanging. He encompasses other earlier formulations of the Absolute: He is the Vedic Purusha, the Upanishadic *brahman*, and so on. Himself unmanifest, He is the source of everything. The world, he states, is strung on him like a row of pearls on a string. Krishna is beyond comprehension. Even the gods are unable to know his full being, says Krishna, since He is the Original God. Krishna uses the full vocabulary of the Absolute to describe his divine being. By the end of Krishna's theological self-portrait, Arjuna is convinced that his charioteer friend is indeed God.

> The great sage Narada and the other sages, Asita Devala and Vyasa as well, all have said that you are the ultimate *brahman*, the highest domain, the supreme means of purification, the eternal divine Purusha, the First God, unborn, and all-pervasive. Now you yourself tell me so. I believe all that you tell me is true. Neither the gods nor the demons know your full manifestation, Lord. Only you, the Supreme Person, know yourself by your self: Creator of all beings, Lord of all creatures, God of the gods, and Lord of all the worlds. (BhG 10.12-15)

But Arjuna's catechism is not quite complete.

Visions of Divine Realities

At this point in the dialogue recorded in the *Bhagavad Gita*, Arjuna asks for one more confirmation of Krishna's divine nature. "I would like to see your own lordly form," he requests, "just as you have described it, o Supreme Lord and Highest Person" (BhG 11.3). Seeing is believing, and Arjuna would like a visual affirmation. Krishna responds immediately. "See my forms, in the hundreds and thousands," he begins. "But," he adds, "you will not be able to see me with your own eyes. So I will give you a divine eye" (BhG 11.8). What follows is the *Gita*'s account of an extraordinary vision, in which Arjuna sees Krishna's Supreme Lordly Form.

Arjuna's vision in the *Bhagavad Gita* in not the only such vision. Visionary literature proliferates in Indic works of the early centuries CE. In the *Mahabharata*, other characters catch glimpses of divine beings in their full effulgence. Early Buddhist Mahayana works like the *Lotus Sutra* likewise feature profuse accounts of cosmic realities in visual form. It is as if "a wave of visionary theism" swept over northern India, as Buddhist scholar Stephen Beyer puts it, or as if Indian religions were becoming "religions of vision" during this period, as James Laine states in his study of visions in the *Mahabharata*.[32] Along with a new emphasis on making gods visible in physical form, in incarnations and icons, comes a profound desire to see through these manifest forms to more effusive divine realities. With his divine eye, Arjuna will see beyond his human-appearing charioteer to the limitless, fathomless abundance contained within the single being of Krishna. So, too, in the *Lotus Sutra*, a light emanating from the forehead of the Buddha Shakyamuni leads his followers to envision extravagant "Buddha fields." Visions figure in both these texts as powerful, persuasive reinforcements of teachings. But each vision is unique, and their differences also highlight key contrasts between Bhagavata Vaishnavas and Buddhists of the Mahayana.

Krishna's All-Encompassing Form

When Krishna grants Arjuna the "divine eye," Arjuna is able to see Krishna's full divine nature, right before his eyes. The vision reveals something already, always present—Krishna's "permanent form"—but which is normally not perceptible with limited human eyes. Krishna does not change his form; Arjuna is simply able to see Him more completely. And what Arjuna sees is a compelling visual confirmation of what Krishna has already said of himself. Arjuna sees countless mouths and eyes, and countless arms holding countless weapons. He sees all the gods contained within Krishna's inclusive form. He sees the entire universe in all its diversity assembled in that one expansive body, much as Krishna claimed. It is radiant almost beyond metaphor. "If a thousand suns were to rise at once into the sky, their brilliance might be like the glory of that Great Being" (BhG 11.12).

Gazing at this awesome form, Arjuna becomes increasingly unsettled. He begins to quake in his innermost being. Arjuna's own situation, on the eve of a gruesome battle, conditions what he sees. He now observes the terrible destruction soon to come, as an act of Krishna.

> All the sons of Dhritarashtra along with the legions of kings who rule the earth, Bhishma, Drona, that charioteer's son Karna, and the leaders of our army too, all are rushing into your fearsome mouths gaping with fangs. I see some dangling between your teeth with their heads already crushed. Like a multitude of gushing torrents of rivers rushing headlong to the ocean, these heroes of the human world are flooding into your gaping mouths. As swiftly as moths fly into a blazing fire to die, just as quickly these men are entering your mouths to die. (BhG 11.26-29)

This is confusing for Arjuna. Hasn't Krishna spoken of his support for Dharma? How can Krishna be the center of the slaughter? Arjuna prays for mercy and asks for an explanation.

Krishna speaks from his Lordly Form. "I am Time," he proclaims, "powerful destroyer of worlds, grown immense here to annihilate these men. Except for you, none of these warriors standing in opposing battlelines will survive" (BhG 11.32). As Supreme Being, Krishna is the agent of destruction as well as of creation. The great battle to come is part of the cyclical world process. The immense bloody sacrifice of Kshatriyas at Kurukshetra will pave the way for a new creation. And Arjuna has a role to play in this holocaust, as Krishna's instrument. "Therefore, rise up and gain fame," Krishna orders. "Conquer your enemies and rule a prosperous kingdom. They have already been destroyed by Me. You will be my mere instrument, Arjuna" (BhG 11.33). Arjuna's Dharma as a Kshatriya warrior is now transfigured into an act of service to the Highest God.

Overwhelmed by this mind-boggling deity and his challenging command, Arjuna falls prostrate. He launches into a hymn of praise to honor Krishna as Supreme Deity and asks for mercy. He wishes to see Krishna as he was before, in his gentle human form. Krishna compassionately removes Arjuna's divine eye, and Arjuna's mind returns to normal.

Arjuna's vision of Krishna's supernal form is a mutual event. On the one side, it requires divine agency. Krishna grants divine vision as an act of favor or grace (*prasada*), which enables Arjuna to see the divine reality. But not everyone is capable of receiving such eyesight. Only some religious paths can lead to vision, as Krishna explains to Arjuna: "Not through the Vedas or austerities, gift-giving or sacrifices, can I be seen as you have just seen me. Only through undistracted Bhakti can one know and see Me in this way and truly attain me, Arjuna" (BhG 11.53-54). In Krishna's view, Bhakti is the privileged method of gaining the kind of visionary knowledge that Arjuna has just experienced.

Limitless Fields of Buddhas

The *Lotus Sutra* opens with the Buddha Shakyamuni seated on Vulture Peak, a favorite meditation spot overlooking the Magadha capital of Rajagriha. He is surrounded by a large audience of followers, somehow squeezed onto the bluff: twelve thousand monks, the nun Mahaprajapati and six thousand of her mendicant followers, large numbers of Bodhisattvas, Vedic gods, Naga kings and their retinues, and the Magadha king Ajatashatru with all his attendants. In this peaceful scene, the Buddha enters into motionless meditation. Suddenly light emanates from him. "Just then a beam of light shot forth from the circle of hair between the Buddha's eyebrows. It spread over eighteen thousand Buddha-fields in the eastern direction. All those Buddha-fields were clearly visible, illuminated by the light of that ray, from the lowest Avichi hell to the highest limit of existence" (LS p. 6).

A single Buddha-field (*buddha-kshetra*) consists of one Buddha and the full realm that surrounds him. The Buddha Shakyamuni and his followers, and the entire world they inhabit, is one such Buddha-field, known as Saha. But thanks to his illuminating beam, the Buddha's followers are able to see far beyond this realm. They can see an expansive vista of limitless Buddha-fields. In each of them they perceive sentient beings in the six states of existence, ranging from those in hells up to the gods in their heavens, and in each one there are Buddhas who arise and teach the Dharma. Each Buddha-field has its monks and nuns, male and female lay followers, yogis and students of yoga, Bodhisattvas. In each Buddha-field, the Buddhas also attain final Nirvana and their physical remains are placed in jeweled stupas. On Vulture Peak, the audience clearly sees, replicated ad infinitum, all the necessary elements of Buddhist religious culture, as this early Mahayana work envisioned it.

Many of those who experience this vision wonder what its purpose is. The wise Manjushri explains that this display indicates that the Buddha Shakyamuni now wishes to preach the Dharma. The Buddha arises from his meditation and begins to instruct his favored disciple Shariputra, and all the onlookers, with the teachings that compose the *Lotus Sutra*.

As with Arjuna's vision at Kurukshetra, this epiphany on Vulture Peak reveals a greatly expanded reality to its audience, one that is true but not normally perceptible to ordinary human faculties. Krishna and the Buddha Shakyamuni initiate these visionary experiences to support their instructions: Krishna to confirm his divine identity, the Buddha to introduce with a flourish his new exposition of Dharma. But the visions take place in very different settings, and they take on different shapes reflecting the contrasting religious commitments of the theistic Bhagavatas and the non-theistic Buddhists. For the Bhagavatas, all realities are perceived to be encompassed within a singular Supreme Being. Arjuna sees more persuasively that Bhakti is the best discipline for realizing Krishna's supremacy and acting in accord with this understanding. In the Mahayana *Lotus Sutra*, the Buddha Shakyamuni illuminates a universe structured around a multiplicity of parallel Buddhas, each in its own Buddha-field. Buddhas, Dharma, and Sanghas stretch as far as the visionary eye can see. This revelation encourages the Buddha's vast audience to attend closely to his articulation of Dharma, the universal Dharma taught by all the Buddhas.

Destination, the Pure Land

Some early Mahayana Buddhists paid particular attention to one Buddha-field located to the west. They called this the Sukhavati (literally, "happy place"), usually translated as the Pure Land. They hoped to be reborn in this blissful place, and they developed visualization techniques to visit and stay in it.

In the *Sukhavativyuha Sutra*, the Buddha Shakyamuni narrates for Ananda the origins of this particular Buddha-field.[33] Long ago a king renounced his throne to become a Buddhist monk, named Dharmakara ("maker of Dharma"). The monk learned from Lokeshvararaja, who was the Buddha of that particular time and place, about the Buddha-fields, and then meditated on all their miraculous qualities. He made a vow: he would follow the Bodhisattva path to become a Buddha himself, and he would create a perfect Buddha-field containing all the best features of all the Buddha-fields, to be known as Sukhavati. The former king would make a Buddha-field where all beings would wish to reside. As part of his intention, Dharmakara set out forty-eight vows pertaining to the Sukhavati. Humans and gods there, he vowed, would possess divine eyes to perceive myriad Buddha-fields, as well as divine ears to hear the Dharma as taught by the myriad Buddhas. Sukhavati would be easy to reach for those living in other realms. Those who wished to be reborn in Sukhavati would need only repeat the name of Amitabha ten times, or even just think of that Buddha, to gain that privilege. At length, Dharmakara succeeded in his quest to become a Buddha, and as the Buddha Amitabha ("unlimited light") he established the Sukhavati as his Buddha-field, where he now presides.

After relating its origins, the Buddha Shakyamuni describes the wondrous landscape of Sukhavati and the astonishing illumination of Amitabha. Ananda requests to see Amitabha and the Sukhavati. Immediately a ray of light shoots out of the palm of Amitabha's hand, and it illuminates all the Buddha-fields. It is like a flood that submerges the entire cosmos, bathing everything in a brilliant golden hue. Not only Ananda, but all the followers sitting together there on Vulture's Peak share this vision. And reciprocally, all the beings residing in Sukhavati see everything in the world of the Buddha Shakyamuni.

In another early Pure Land work, the *Amitayurbuddha Anusmriti Sutra*, the Buddha Shakyamuni teaches a method of visualization by which one can visit the Sukhavati.[34] At the opening of this work, King Ajatashatru has usurped the Magadha throne from his father and imprisoned his own mother, Vaidehi. Emaciated and grief-stricken, Vaidehi prays for help from the Buddha, who as usual is seated with his followers on Vulture Peak outside the Magadha capital. Suddenly the Buddha appears before her, purple-gold in color, sitting on a jeweled lotus. Vaidehi explains that she is fed up with the defiled and evil world in which she lives. She wishes to learn how to meditate on a world that is pure and radiant, free of these worldly afflictions—namely, the Sukhavati. The Buddha leads Vaidehi in a meditative practice involving thirteen steps to get her there.

To begin the guided visualization of Sukhavati, one should look at the setting sun in the west with concentration, until one is able to visualize it with eyes either open or closed. From there, one should visualize the crystalline ground of the Sukhavati, its trees, its lakes, and its palaces. The Buddha describes each visual stage in detail. One next visualizes the throne of Amitabha, then Amitabha himself, and then his two accompanying Bodhisattvas. In the final steps of the meditation, one envisions oneself being born in the Sukhavati, emerging from a gradually opening lotus flower and then paying honor to Amitabha. Following the Buddha's instructions, Vaidehi is able to see Amitabha and his attendant Bodhisattvas, and she rejoices in her heart. From her meditation she gains clarity of mind and insight into the true nature of things. The Buddha Shakyamuni promises that all those who practice this meditation will be see Amitabha and his blissful Buddha-field Sukhavati during this lifetime.

Visual Religion in Early India

"Hinduism," writes Diana Eck in her widely read book *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, "is an imaginative, an 'image-making' religious tradition in which the sacred is seen as present in the visible world—the world we see in multiple images and deities, in sacred places, and in people."[35] This is not just true of Hinduism. Buddhists, Jains, and other religious communities of India have shared this image-making ethos. As Eck continues, "India is a visual and visionary culture, one in which the eyes have a prominent role in the apprehension of the sacred."

The main elements in this visual orientation within Indic religious cultures arose most clearly in the early centuries CE, during the period we are calling the Kushana Era. We see the introduction of images representing sacred figures: Mahavira and other Jain Tirthankaras, the Buddha Shakyamuni and primary Bodhisattvas, and deities of the developing Hindu pantheon. In many cases, these served as icons for worship, and we see in this period the first texts that set out rituals for honoring icons. Liturgies of puja drew on existing protocols for honoring highly respected persons, but they redirected those acts toward images. Early Bhagavata works of this period set out foundations of Bhakti, or religious devotion, both as an emotional sensibility and a spiritual discipline. Kushana Era texts also describe visions in which exemplary audiences are granted the ability to see beyond their immediate settings, the much vaster divine dimensions, whether it be an all-encompassing deity like Krishna or an infinite vista of Buddha-fields. Some texts also set out the beginnings of meditative techniques of visualization, designed to allow religious practitioners to gain their own visions. Together, these elements form a new religious dispensation of visually oriented religious cultures that would prove enormously far-reaching and long-lasting in South Asia.

These new developments first appeared most clearly in the areas under Kushana rule in the early centuries CE, like Mathura on the Yamuna and Gandhara in the northwest. But like Bala's Buddha, these innovations were quickly disseminated, not just by barge down the Ganges, but also southward in the subcontinent and northward into Central Asia and China. Buddhist institutions in southern India like the great stupa at Amaravati quickly adapted Buddha images as they reconstructed the sacred center. Images were crucial to the spread of Buddhism beyond Indic regions. Monks traveled the trade routes carrying texts (often in immaterial memorized form) and Buddha images. Texts required painstaking translation, but images were more directly comprehensible.

Far-reaching as these new developments were, they did not effect a wholesale conversion. They were controversial, and many religious specialists remained loyal to earlier religious modes. One can trace some of these debates in Smarta Dharmashastras and in Buddhist works of the period. We can also see more nuanced strategies of adaptation and incorporations, such as the Baudhayana school of Smarta Brahmins, who set out image liturgies for Vishnu that maintained Vedic mantras, included a fire sacrifice, and made sure that Brahmin ritual specialists received proper honoraria for their services.

The visually oriented developments of this period laid the groundwork for a new religious landscape in India. Throughout the first millennium, religious imagery proliferated and temples grew ever larger. When the Afghani Ghaznavid ruler Mahmud visited Mathura in 1006, many centuries after workshops there had fabricated the earliest Jain and Buddhist icons, he was astonished by the extraordinary religious structures, or "idol temples," he encountered there. His court chronicler al-Utbi describes it:

> When he came to that place he saw a city, of wonderful fabric and conception, so that one might say, this is a building of Paradise . . . They had brought immense stones and had laid a level foundation upon high stairs. Around it and at its sides they had placed one thousand castles, built of stone, which they had made idol temples, and had fastened them well. And in the midst of the city they had built a temple higher than all, to delineate the beauty and decoration of which the pens of all writers and the pencils of all painters would be powerless, and would not be able to attain to the power of fixing their minds upon it and considering it.[36]

11

The Four Human Aims: Guides for the Good Life

ONCE UPON A TIME, the story goes, people did not need a king or a government. There was no punishment, and none was needed, since people carefully maintained Dharma. But then confusion (*moha*) entered the picture, and along with it came greed (*lobha*). Due to greed, people were overpowered by desire (*kama*). And when they were dominated by desire, Dharma disappeared.

> When humans came into contact with things they did not own, desire became their highest concern. As they came to be dominated by desire, passion afflicted them. Overcome with passion, they did not remember what should be done and what should not, which women could be approached sexually and which could not, what can be eaten and what cannot, what sin is and what it is not. They no longer offered up sacrifice. When this human world fell into complete disorder, the Veda perished. And with the loss of the Veda, Dharma was ruined. (MBh 12.59.18-21)

The gods were terrified. Without the Vedic sacrifices to nourish them, they began to lose their powers. They sought out the help of the creator god Brahman, and Brahman promised to do his best to restore the proper order of things.

In the *Mahabharata*, Bhishma tells this story to Yudhishthira to explain the genesis of kingship and the special status of kings. According to his origin story, the overwhelming forces of greed, desire, and passion lead to a complete deterioration of the social order, and this ruptures the productive reciprocity of humans and gods. Deprived of sacrificial offerings, the gods are reduced in power, and they can no longer shower their benefits down onto humans in return. This is the state of anarchy—both within human society and in the broader cosmic order binding together humans and the divine. To restore the Veda and

Dharma will require the creation of kingship, as Bhishma goes on to explain. But before that, Brahman carries out a different kind of creation. From his mind, Brahman creates a massive treatise, 100,000 chapters long, describing Dharma, Artha, and Kama. He calls this the Set of Three Aims (*trivarga*). In addition to these three worldly aims, some persons intend to gain a state of transcendence. Accordingly, Brahman also discusses a fourth motive, Moksha. These four together are known as the four aims of human life (*purushartha*).

At the very beginning of things, according to this origin story, the creator Brahman set out a master guidebook for the conduct of human life in society. It was comprehensive. As Bhishma observes, "In the treatise that Brahman composed, everything in the world—Dharma, Artha, Kama, and Moksha—is put into words" (MBh 12.59.85). Brahman's original work offered guidelines for the perennial human questions of how to live a good and pleasurable life, under good governance, in a properly ordered society, and how to attain the highest spiritual state. Bhishma goes on to explain that this original operating manual has been transmitted by gods and human sages over time. During the transmission it has been divided by topics and progressively abridged in size, due to human limitations of comprehension and lifespan. But, he suggests, parts of it still circulate among humans.

Shastra and Science

In his story, Bhishma calls Brahman's original master-guide a *shastra*, usually translated as "treatise." The term "shastra" comes from a verb root that conveys actions of directing and teaching. Shastras are verbal texts that seek to discuss a particular subject matter systematically and authoritatively. They aim to set out principles and to give teachings that will be (as Kautilya says of his shastra on Artha) "easy to grasp and understand, decisive in doctrine, clearly worded, and free of prolixity" (ASh 1.1.19). From the early centuries CE, there are important shastras that deal with the three aims of worldly life: the *Kamasutras* of Vatsyayana Mallanaga, the *Arthashastra* of Kautilya, and the *Manava Dharmashastra* attributed to Manu, the first human. As for the fourth *purushartha*, Badarayana's *Brahmasutras* and Patanjali's *Yogasutras* take up the theory and practice of meditation as a key method of attaining that transcendent goal.

Both Vatsyayana and Manu locate their works explicitly as descendants of Brahman's original shastra. This gives them the prestige of a mythical source. It also indicates their claim to be timeless or transhistorical in the principles they set forth.[1]

Historically, we can look at these works as the compositions of learned experts who have reflected on and debated these topics. Shastra authors frequently refer to other colleagues whose works have not been preserved, and they also include or stage debates among other named experts within the text. I'll use the term "science" for these disciplines of knowledge, not in the narrower sense of the experimental or natural sciences, but in an older and broader way, as in the human sciences. In that Aristotelian sense, as R. G. Collingwood suggests, a science is "a body of systematic or orderly thinking about a determinate subject-matter."[2] Vatsyayana's treatise on the subject of human pleasure and Kautilya's on the pursuit of royal statecraft certainly fit this usage. So, too, do Manu's guidelines for living a righteous life and organizing a righteous society, and Patanjali's systematic presentation of yogic forms of meditation. They are similar to other classical Indic sciences, such as grammar and astronomy, that had developed initially as adjuncts to the Veda. In addition to the four aims of human life, many other spheres of activity in India gained their own shastras: medicine, cooking, mathematics, elephant rearing, and others. In this chapter we will look at the shastras dealing with the four principal aims of human life as guidebooks that provided learned, reflective, organized guidelines for human conduct in these different spheres.

Each shastra addresses itself to those most likely to have a special interest in that science. Vatsyayana considers Kama a universal constituent of human life, but he directs his advice toward certain pleasure-seeking types of persons, such as the affluent man-about-town and the courtesan. Kautilya's *Arthashastra* advises a king and his ministers in the science of statecraft. Manu addresses his Dharmashastra most directly to Smarta Brahmins, but he also more ambitiously sets out a Brahmin's-eye vision of a social order based on that conception of Dharma. Badarayana presents a method for a Veda-reciting twice-born to seek liberation. Patanjali outlines the best practices for a practitioner of yogic meditation.

These shastras often employ a *sutra* format. That is, they set out their tenets and recommendations in very brief, aphoristic form. These terse statements are strung together (the core meaning of "sutra") into texts that are short enough to be memorized but too laconic to be fully understood on their own. In early India such foundational works would have been transmitted orally from teacher to student, memorized by the student, and explained by the teacher's additional commentary. In the subsequent development of these intellectual disciplines, their oral and written commentaries played an enormous role. As Gary Tubb and Emery Boose observe, "Works of commentary pervade the history of Sanskrit thought to a degree that is unparalleled in the writings of most other traditions."[3] Important core texts like those of Manu and Badarayana attracted numerous commentators, who often debate one another over the correct explication of the original.

It is important to keep in mind that these are normative treatises. They offer advice or guidance, in the optative mood of "should" and "ought," to particular audiences about how best to conduct their pursuits. Though the Dharmashastra of Manu has sometimes been translated as the "Laws of Manu," they do not set out laws and did not have legal status. They are closer to modern guidebooks in their efforts to set out proper codes of conduct or best practices for various situations. They do not aim to provide accurate description of historical reality. Nevertheless, they are valuable historical documents. Mark McClish and Patrick Olivelle put it well: "As products of their respective cultural milieus, *śāstras* do offer us information about the past, but only if we first understand them to be intellectualized reflections on the principles believed to underlie the proper undertaking of various human activities rather than as attempts to describe historical human practices."[4] We meet in these works various Indic ideal-types: the affluent urban male, the enterprising courtesan, the ambitious king, the pious Brahmin householder, and the meditating yogi, among others. Despite their own claims to timelessness, they provide fascinating glimpses into the ideals and aims of important social groups in the history of early India.

Kama: Desire, Pleasure, and Self-Mastery

In modern times, Vatsyayana's *Kamasutras* is best known for its frank and detailed treatment of erotic techniques, As translators Wendy Doniger and Sudhir Kakar admit, "Most Americans and Europeans think that the sexual positions are all that there is to the *Kamasutra*."[5] The guidebook does classify and comment on the many methods of kissing, erotic scratching, love biting, and slapping, and it does describe myriad sexual positions. These are all intimately part of Vatsyayana's scientific and taxonomic treatment of Kama. But this is just one section of his treatise. Much of his work concerns matters that we would classify as lifestyle advice. Vatsyayana sets out guidelines for persons in specific life situations. The *Kamasutra* devotes sections to the affluent urban male, the unmarried woman seeking a husband, the wife in a monogamous marriage, the senior wife and the junior wife in a polygamous household, women in harems, and courtesans of different degrees of exclusivity. It is striking that most of these types are female. Vatsyayana speaks inescapably as a male, but in comparison to other works of early India, the *Kamasutras* acknowledges the subjectivity of females and the possibilities of female agency much more fully.

Vatsyayana traces the genealogy of the discipline back to Brahman's composition of 100,000 chapters. From this original, he says, various expert authors passed along the treatise, shortened it, and separated it by topics: sexual technique, female virgins, other men's wives, courtesans, and so on. Vatsyayana's project is to reunite the topics and condense the entire subject of Kama into a brief work. Not much is known about Vatsyayana Mallanaga as a historical figure, but scholars date his treatise on Kama to the third century CE. Vatsyayana's world, in the *Kamasutras*, is the affluent cosmopolitan society that took shape in the early centuries CE in northern India, with its urban centers, royal courts, and pan-Asian networks of trade.

A Science of Kama

Why should Indians of classical times require a science of Kama? Wasn't desire a hindrance to the religious life? From the time of Yajnavalkya in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, Indian religious thinkers had consistently portrayed Kama, or desire, as a problem. Among the Shramana groups, teachers repeatedly cited Kama as one of the most pernicious obstacles to overcome for religious seekers. Kama, they argued, leads to attachment, to all the ties that keep us bound to the world. This is true for individuals and for society as a whole. In Bhishma's origin story about kingship in the *Mahabharata*, Kama is one of the forces that overpowers people and leads to a state of social deterioration. The early Buddhists told a similar story—though without the Vedas or divine intervention—in which greed and desire enter into a previously idyllic social order, create chaos, and require the disciplining force of a king to restore order.[6]

Yet it is necessary to acknowledge that Kama is a potent, even ubiquitous, force in human life. Kama can lead also to beneficial religious actions. In his Dharmashastra, Manu, no friend of hedonism, portrays Kama as universal.

> To be ruled by Kama is not praised. But in this world there is no such thing as desirelessness. Even Vedic Brahmins study the Veda and perform their rites out of Kama. Kama is the root of intention, and sacrifices arise from intentions. Every vow and moral self-restraint is born of intention, so it is said. We never see anything done in this world by someone without Kama; whatever is done is set in motion through Kama. By engaging in them properly, one can

> obtain all one's intended desires in this world, and go to the world of the gods hereafter. (MDhSh 2.2-5)

For Manu, the key word here is "properly." As the basis for intentional action, he asserts, Kama must be properly directed toward righteous ends or Dharma.

In the *Kamasutras*, Vatsyayana defines Kama differently. Kama can have both transitive and intransitive meanings. Manu uses Kama transitively, as the desire for something (worldly benefits, heavenly afterlife), which provides the intention to take actions (learning the Veda, performing sacrifices) that lead to those ends. Vatsyayana focuses on Kama intransitively, as the experience of sensory pleasure. "Kama," he states, "consists of the pleasurable engagement of the sensory faculties—ear, skin, eye, tongue, and nose—with their proper objects of sensation, supervised by the mind, in connection with the self" (KS 1.2.11). Here Vatsyayana refers to the broadly held psychology of perception in early India. Human sense faculties are oriented outward; they are attracted by objects of sensation and reach out toward the world. Of all these pleasurable sensory engagements, according to the *Kamasutras*, the highest form of Kama lies within sexual intercourse.

The purpose of Vatsyayana's guidebook in the broadest sense is to instruct his audience in attaining sensory pleasure. This requires knowledge and technique. Unlike sexual coupling among animals, he observes, human sexuality is a social act involving both male and female whose mutual engagement enhances the erotic pleasures for both. For that reason, both males and females ought to study the *Kamasutras*. (Homoerotic guidance is largely absent from Vatsyayana's account, but Doniger and Kakar suggest that "it is possible to excavate several alternative sexualities latent in the text's somewhat fuzzy boundaries between homoeroticism and heteroeroticism."[7]) Kama can and should be cultivated.

Vatsyayana sees Kama as a key part of the good life. In fact, it is essential, a necessary means of sustaining the body, just as much as food is. But he also acknowledges that Kama can have damaging effects, just as infectious diseases may weaken or destroy the body. Vatsyayana cites famous cases where even the most powerful males came undone due to their lust for desirable but improper females: the Vedic god Indra's desire for the sage's wife Ahalya, the demonic ruler Ravana for Rama's wife Sita, the powerful prince Kichaka for Draupadi. Kama, then, is not to be pursued when it conflicts with other life purposes. Even Vatsyayana admits that one should not transgress Dharma in pursuit of Kama. When the three aims compete, he says, Dharma takes precedence over Artha, which in turn precedes Kama, since adequate wealth allows the pursuit of pleasure.

The Nagaraka*, Man-about-Town*

The male protagonist of the *Kamasutras* is called a *nagaraka*, a city dweller. He has completed his education and is a householder, with sufficient resources to allow him considerable leisure. In the Indian society of the early centuries CE, such affluent *nagarakas* could have been princes and kings, members of the royal court, wealthy merchants and their sons, successful artisans and the like. For Vatsyayana, class origin is less important than wealth and leisure. In the *Kamasutras*, the author advises this urban householder on home design and furnishings, which ought to include things like cages of pet birds and swings set in the shade. He provides guidance on matters of personal grooming.

The nagaraka lives alone, but he enjoys an active social life. Vatsyayana describes drinking parties, garden picnics, and convivial gatherings of all sorts. These could include performances by musicians and actors, poetry recitations, friendly competitions in painting or singing, and other cultural diversions. Accordingly, the nagaraka should be assiduous in his practice of the arts. Vatsyayana lists sixty-four arts that an accomplished man-about-town should study, along with the *Kamasutras* itself. These include music, dance, painting, flower arrangement, mixing drinks, cooking, telling jokes, teaching birds to speak, understanding languages and local dialects, improvising poetry, gambling, athletics, and many others.[8]

The man-about-town lives a cultivated life, and his sexual activity is likewise a matter of cultivation and mastery. Here is where Vatsyayana places his extensive catalogue of erotic technique. But this knowledge is not and should not be restricted to males, since sexual activity is a matter of mutual engagement. For this reason, Vatsyayana insists that a female, too, should study the science of Kama before she reaches the prime of life and then continuing after marriage. Just as there are sixty-four arts, there is another more specialized set of sixty-four: the sixty-four arts of love. These were taught by Vatsyayana's predecessor Babhravya. The erotic arts can bring one wealth, success, and good fortune, says the *Kamasutras*, and women love it. This, too, is a valuable discipline of knowledge, not just for private practice. It confers a social distinction, especially with females. "The male who is skilled in these sixty-four arts is regarded with affection and respect by young women, by wives of other men, and by courtesans" (KS 2.10.54). Females may likewise be expert in these arts, and the courtesan (as we will see) employs them both skillfully and deliberately.

Vatsyayana approaches religious culture from a different perspective than we have seen elsewhere. For the man-about-town, religion figures as another opportunity for enjoyment. The nagaraka participates actively in religious festivals and ceremonies, but he regards them primarily as convivial social settings for pleasurable pastimes. He certainly does not share the renunciatory orientation of the Shramanas and other disciplinary communities, nor does he seek future this-worldly benefits through veneration of gods. Rather, he pursues enjoyment in the here-and-now sensual features of religious and cultural gatherings. The sensory pleasurableness of religious ceremonies is less often addressed in Indian religious literature, though it would certainly have been an appealing feature for many participants, not just for the affluent man-about-town.

Vatsyayana describes fortnightly soirees at the temple of Sarasvati, patron goddess of the arts. The nagaraka and his invited guests host thespians, either local ones or traveling drama troupes, and enjoy their performances. Festivals associated with other deities offer similar opportunities for aesthetic enjoyment. In one passage, Vatsyayana lists twenty special "sports" (*krida*) celebrated on particular dates in the lunar or solar calendar. Some are pan-Indian, while others are regional observances. Some are well known. The raucous festival of Holi, celebrated on the full-moon day in the springtime month of Phalguna, is an ancient tradition that continues to the present. The Spring Festival (*suvasantaka*) revolving around Kama in his divine form, figures as a beloved celebration in the Gupta Era dramas of Kalidasa and Shudraka. The Kaumudi Jagara, an all-night vigil on the full moon of Kartika month, is devoted to the god Skanda and also is a time for dice games and gambling. But others in the list are uncertain and intriguing. Vatsyayana mentions a "Night of the Yakshas," but he assumes his audience will know what it is. Several of the sports involve eating special foods, most likely at the time of year when they first become ripe or available: mangos, sugarcane, *abhyusha* grain. There are sports of water games, swinging, flower gathering, and wreath making. There is an amorous game called "kadamba-tree fighting." Religious ceremonies mix with festive games in the pleasure-seeking life of the affluent nagaraka.

Virgins, Wives, and Courtesans

For males, as the *Kamasutras* portrays it, the most important social criterion is wealth. This allows males an independence of action. The nagaraka appears as Vatsyayana's ideal-type male—affluent, leisured, skillful in myriad arts, and sexually active. For females, the crucial factor is their domestic situation—unmarried, married, or independent. Vatsyayana therefore organizes his treatment of females in the *Kamasutras* according to their relationships with males. These include the young unmarried woman (*kanya*, or "virgin"); the "only wife"; wives in polygamous households; women in harems; and courtesans.

Vatsyayana devotes one chapter to the young woman seeking an appropriate husband. He begins with a description of a desirable marriage partner from a male perspective: a virgin of good family, with parents still alive, with beauty, good character, and lucky marks on her body. The suitor should court such a girl, and Vatsyayana gives suggestions for how to go about this. But in contrast with many other early Indian sources such as the Dharmashastras, Vatsyayana allows the woman agency in this endeavor. Her goal, he says, should be to form the "best alliance" that will enable both wife and husband to treat each other as unique individuals and to make one another happy. In the play of courtship, the female has choices to make among suitors, and ways to convey her intentions, both welcoming and dismissive. The male suitor must be conscientious and alert to these signals. Much different from a simple transaction or alliance among families, Vatsyayana treats the dance of courtship between male and female with complexity, involving personal and social calculations.

Among wives, Vatsyayana distinguishes the "only wife" in a monogamous marriage from these women in households with two or more wives. A prime consideration for the only wife is to conduct herself in a way that prevents or discourages her husband from taking a second wife. She should treat her husband like a god. Vatsyayana sets out the numerous and laborious ways the wife should seek to hold her husband's heart: the close attention to home cleanliness, the garden she should plant, the careful supervision of domestic expenses, the beautification and adornment of her own body, and her sexual availability to her husband. And she should bear sons, for if she fails to bear children or gives birth only to daughters, she may well be supplanted by a co-wife. Vatsyayana recommends that, if she does not have children, the wife be the one to suggest that her husband take on another wife. But she must then use all her powers to ensure that she prevails as the higher or senior wife. The junior wife treats her co-wife outwardly as a mother, says Vatsyayana, but she may eventually be able to dislodge the senior wife and assume the role of the only wife. And when many wives share a husband and household, Vatsyayana advises the female on how to form alliances, provoke quarrels, and gain the upper hand with the presiding male, the husband. The domestic world of husbands and wives, as Vatsyayana sets it out, is a patriarchal one centered on the male husband, where the female wives must engage in active calculation and sometimes aggressive domestic politics.

While most females in the world of the *Kamasutra* must gauge their pursuits with reference to the males on whom they depend, there is one category of females who act as autonomous agents: the *ganikas*, or high-class courtesans. They even insist that their own voices be represented in the male-authored *Kamasutras*. Vatsyayana explains that his chapter on the courtesans draws on an independent work by Dattaka, commissioned by the courtesan community of Pataliputra. Dattaka was uniquely qualified to compose this, according to a well-known story. It seems that he had once, during a festival to bless a pregnant woman, touched the god Shiva with his foot. For this polluting faux pas, Dattaka was cursed by Shiva to become a woman. Later, he persuaded Shiva to remove the curse, and he transitioned back to his earlier male identity. But he had profited in experience from his time as a woman. His double knowledge as both female and male, it was said, made him especially qualified to represent authoritatively the perspective of female courtesans.[9]

In many ways the courtesan is the female counterpart of the nagaraka. She participates in the social get-togethers and garden parties of the affluent men, and courtesans may hold their own drinking parties and invite men. Like the man-about-town, the courtesan should be proficient in the arts, and she displays her skills at those gatherings. They might include singing, playing musical instruments, or impromptu composition and recitation of poetry.

The courtesan should also be proficient in the sixty-four erotic arts, as outlined by Babhravya. But for her, sexuality is not just about Kama; it also involves Artha. Vatsyayana begins the chapter:

> For courtesans, there is both pleasure and livelihood in their sexual relations with men. Having sex for the sake of pleasure is natural; doing it for wealth is artificial. Even so, the courtesan should make it appear natural, because men trust women who are motivated by desire. (KS 6.1.1-4)

Dissimulation is part of the skill set of the working courtesan. In one sense she also depends on males for her livelihood, just as wives do, but the courtesan is able to seek her own ends with a greater degree of autonomy. "Courtesans," says Vatsyayana, echoing the views of the Pataliputra courtesans, "examine lovers and join with them. In joining with them, they enchant them. From those who are enchanted, they get their money. And in the end, the courtesans release them" (KS 6.3.45-46). Within marriage, if a wife fails to satisfy, the husband has the option of taking on another wife. In the world of the courtesan, she retains the capability of cutting off her relations with men who fail to please or support her adequately. She operates as a businesswoman, pursuing Artha.

Artha: The Science of Statecraft

Like Kama, the Sanskrit term Artha covers a wide-ranging semantic field. In its broadest sense, Artha points to the aim or purpose of anything. The term appears, for example, in the compound *purusha-artha* to denote the aims of human life. In grammar, Artha refers to the sense of meaning of a word; the Artha is the signified of a signifier. It can designate many of the ends to which humans direct themselves, such as wealth, property, power, influence, or fame. In the context of the set of three worldly aims, Artha refers primarily to the pursuit of worldly gains.

The text of the *Arthashastra*, as we have it, reflects a complex compositional process. The author identifies himself as Kautilya, but there is a long tradition in India—dating back at least to the fifth century CE—that connects Kautilya with Chanakya of Mauryan fame. As we have seen, Chanakya's shifty machinations on behalf of Chandragupta Maurya were legendary, and it is possible that his pragmatic approach to royal politics stimulated the beginnings of political science in India. But Kautilya's work came into form during the Kushana Era, centuries after Chanakya's lifetime.[10] It is clear that Kautilya saw himself as part of a long-standing intellectual discipline of knowledge. He refers often to other experts in the field of political science. As he announces at the start of his first chapter, "This *Arthashastra* has been composed by collecting into one work all those treatises on Artha composed by past teachers, for the purposes of gaining and protecting the earth" (ASh 1.1.1). Kautilya often stages debates with other experts within his own work, in which not surprisingly he gets the final word. (In Indic scientific discourse, the views or arguments of others form the "preliminary position," or *purvapaksha*, while the author's own final statement is the "perfected conclusion," or *siddhanta*.) Kautilya's synthesis of other experts was evidently so successful that the other works to which he refers have not been preserved. Kautilya's *Arthashastra* is the dominant treatise in the field of early Indian kingship.

For many modern observers, Kautilya's work is often reduced to a simple Western comparison: Kautilya is the "Indian Machiavelli." Certainly the *Arthashastra* shares with *The Prince* a focus on the ruler and an attitude of political realism, but the comparison does not do justice to the comprehensiveness of Kautilya's investigation and prescriptive explication of all sorts of matters regarding statecraft. The *Arthashastra* provides far more details of nitty-gritty concerns in the world of the authoritative monarch than Machiavelli would do many centuries later. Here, we can touch on just a few features of this expansive work—the education of the ruler, the broad shape of the monarchy, and the role of religion within Kautilya's vision of society.

Education of the Monarch

Kautilya's treatise on Artha, the *Arthashastra*, addresses itself especially to the king and the royal court.[11] The king, after all, is a figure particularly concerned with the exercise of power and the prosperity of the kingdom. This work sets out in great detail a science of monarchical politics or statecraft, as envisioned in classical India.

Kautilya assumes that monarchy is the normal form of the state. He does acknowledge the existence of other types of polities, such as confederations and tribal communities, but kingship clearly prevailed over those other modes of governance in early India. The king was crucial to stability and social order. Without a king—as in Bhishma's origin story—human society is liable to be overcome by destructive forces of unfettered desire and greed. Kautilya refers to this state of anarchy as the "rule of the fishes" (*matsyanyaya*). In the absence of a powerful king, the strong devour the weak. But in contrast to Bhishma's account, Kautilya posits no divine intervention to create the first king. Kingship is a pragmatic institution born of coercive force, not a theistic one instituted by the gods. Kautilya uses the royal staff or rod of punishment (*danda*) as synecdoche for the king's coercive power. The king is the "staff-wielder." And through the king's judicious application of his powerful staff, he brings order and prosperity to the kingdom. Through the wise exercise of the staff, says Kautilya, the king "obtains what has not been obtained, protects what has been obtained, increases what is being protected, and distributes that increase upon worthy recipients" (ASh 1.4.3). So, he concludes, the workings of the world depend on the king's governance.

All political power is vested in the person of the king. Kautilya is deeply concerned, therefore, with the education and training of the king. In a sense, this is the central purpose of the *Arthashastra*. Kautilya sets out a curriculum of study for a prince and a daily schedule for the king. From the age of three, the young prince should learn writing and arithmetic. Once he has undergone Vedic initiation, he studies the Veda, critical inquiry, economics, and the science of governance (as exemplified in the *Arthashastra*). Moreover, Kautilya adds, he should remain chaste until the age of sixteen. As an adult, education and training continue. In the morning, the king should practice the four types of military training: elephants, horses, chariots, and weapons. During the next part of the day he should listen to a variety of subjects, including ancient traditions, reports of current events, stories and illustrations, Dharmashastra, and Arthashastra. The rest of the time, he ought to review what he has heard and also apply himself to new subjects. "From what is heard, intellect arises. From intellect comes discipline, and from discipline comes mastery of the self" (ASh 1.5.16). And this, Kautilya concludes, is the great value of the sciences (*vidya*).

Because the king enjoys tremendous power and access to riches, Kautilya stresses the importance of the king's self-mastery. Through his training in the sciences, the king gains control over his senses. (Kautilya uses the appropriate martial term, *jaya*, or victory, for this mastery.) He does this by overcoming the "six internal enemies": desire, anger, greed, passion, pride, and lust. He brings the senses under restraint by ensuring that they do not engage improperly with the sensory qualities. A king who fails to gain this self-control will come to ruin. Like Vatsyayana, Kautilya cites many past kings who were destroyed when the internal enemies got the better of them. Ravana's pride in not returning the wife of another man, Duryodhana's greed in refusing to give up a portion of his kingdom to his cousins, Janamejaya's anger at the Brahmins—"these and many other kings who failed to master their senses and came under the power of the six enemies were destroyed along with their kinsmen and their kingdoms" (ASh 1.6.11).

The Shape of the Royal State

In the classical Indian state, the king may be a unitary sovereign, with all political power grounded in his person. But the king is also understood to be an expansive being, with "limbs" (*anga*) that extend his authority outward. These are usually listed as seven: the king himself, the ministers, the territory, the fortified city, the treasury, the army, and the allies. Instead of "limbs," Kautilya uses the term *prakriti*, the seven "natural elements" of the monarchical polity. As head of state, the king must employ these limbs or elements as his agents. For example, to continue the bodily metaphor, he uses spies to extend the power of his eyes throughout the realm. The army is his metaphorical arm. A great plethora of ministers are involved in extending the sovereign will of the king. "Because the king must carry out many actions in many places simultaneously," Kautilya states, "he should employ ministers to perform them in his absence, so that optimum time and place for those actions not be wasted" (ASh 1.9.8).

The science of royal statecraft, therefore, requires an examination of the many constituents of governance. Kautilya envisions an elaborate system of administration and reiterates that the king himself must be energetic, for only then do people in his service also act with vigor. At the innermost circle are the ministers who consult directly with the king and act on his behalf. Under these high officials, there are departments that are responsible for the collection of revenue through taxation on agricultural produce, tariffs on trade, and taxes levied on other profitable enterprises. The king is responsible for the administration of justice, and for this he appoints ministerial judges to adjudicate disputes and to conduct trials. The king also assigns superintendents for all sorts of enterprises within the realm: mines, the mint, liquor, gambling, courtesans, elephant forests, prisons, shipping, and many more.

Governing a kingdom in early India required attention both to its internal prosperity and to its external relations with other kingdoms. Kautilya assumes that a ruler will seek to expand his resources, to obtain what has not yet been obtained. But one kingdom is surrounded by others, and these, too, the king must presume, will seek their own growth. A monarch therefore requires knowledge of the other surrounding polities. He must be able to form alliances, engage in negotiations, make calculations of relative strength, and conduct military campaigns against other rulers when prudent and promising.

As a framework for these calculations, Kautilya introduces a model of the "circles of kingdoms" (*mandala*). The innermost circle is one's own state. One begins from the assumption that bordering kingdoms are by nature adversaries, since they are likely to covet their neighboring territories. The circle of one's own kingdom, then, is encircled by other enemy kingdoms. These kingdoms, too, have their enemies, so the kingdom on the other side of one's neighbor is an enemy of one's enemy and therefore potentially an ally. Things become complex quite quickly in this abstract modeling of interstate politics, but it offers a useful starting point. Based on these assessments, a king could employ a variety of methods—Kautilya outlines a sixfold strategy—to achieve the best outcome for his kingdom. But in the monarchical world envisioned in the *Arthashastra*, the king's position is always precarious, since other polities are likewise motivated toward their own interests. Hence, Kautilya stresses the importance of careful analysis and rational deliberation, within a royal policy we would term realpolitik.

Religion and the Pragmatic King

For a ruler adhering to the guidelines of the *Arthashastra*, religion is a pragmatic matter. Kautilya distinguishes the realm of humans from that of the gods. In the human realm, he says, human agents may pursue good policies or bad ones, and their visible results with be successes or failures. In the divine realm, by contrast, one may obtain good fortune or bad fortune, but the causes of these outcomes remain invisible. "One can think rationally about action in the human realm; the divine realm is outside rational comprehension" (ASh 6.2.6). Within the human realm, Kautilya argues, the king should act as a rational agent, employing good policies to achieve beneficial outcomes for the kingdom. This involves support of religious institutions as part of the existing social order.

At a personal level, Kautilya recommends that the king study the Veda and perform some daily ceremonies. These activities are part of the discipline and training of the ruler. He appoints as his chief counselor (*purohita*) a Brahmin learned in the Vedas and its auxiliary disciplines, and expert in divine omens as well as in the science of Artha. "The king should follow his counsel like a pupil follows his preceptor, a son his father, or a servant does his master" (ASh 1.9.10). He should also employ Vedic Brahmins as his court priests, and they should observe the prevailing ritual practices. In the *Arthashastra*, Kautilya assumes that this royal ceremonial will be in the Vedic sacrificial lineage. But he is not concerned with the liturgical rites by which one becomes a king ritually, such as the Rajasuya, nor with imperial rituals like the Horse Sacrifice. These Vedic rituals may impart a divine quality to the king, but Kautilya's overriding concern is with the king as a human actor.[12]

The *Arthashastra* recognizes the multiplicity of religious specialists and institutions within early Indian society. Kautilya mentions Shramana groups like Buddhists and Ajivakas, renouncers, and ascetics as well as Vedic Brahmins. The king can make use of them for his own benefit. For example, the peripatetic lifestyle of homeless ascetics makes them particularly useful as royal spies, since they can wander into other territories and other kingdoms with impunity. Vedic Brahmins are valuable for settling the countryside and thereby increasing its productivity. Kautilya recommends that the king give land grants to Brahmins, exempt from all fines and taxes. The actual farming labor in these Brahmin settlements would be carried out mostly by Shudra agriculturalists, while the Brahmin males are left free to pursue their ritual and pedagogic activities. Farther afield, in marginal land that is not suitable for cultivation, the king should provide tracts to Brahmin renouncers for Vedic study and sacrifice. In the towns also, the king should have temples for the gods placed in the center, and shrines for Yakshas acting as guardian spirits placed on the outskirts.

The pragmatic king envisioned in the *Arthashastra* acts for the good of himself and for the polity over which he presides. He protects the security of the kingdom and seeks to increase its prosperity. Religion can be useful in this. The king studies the Vedas and the sciences to gain self-mastery, and he employs Brahmins as counselors and ministers. He supports the various religious groups within the kingdom and gives special consideration to Vedic Brahmins through land grants and provisions for renunciatory ashrams. But this forms a minor part of his royal activities. If religion concerns itself primarily with the divine realm, as Kautilya would see it, the king focuses his greatest effort within the human realm.

Dharma and the Righteous Society

At the start of his Dharmashastra, Manu sits in meditation.[13] A group of sages approach, pay their respects, and ask him to instruct them in Dharma. The scene is not unlike those that begin with the Buddha Shakyamuni and his disciples on Vulture Peak. But in this case, Manu will instruct his listeners in the shastra that he alone received from Svayambhu Brahman, who composed the master treatise at the beginning of creation.

As we have seen, Dharma is a multivalent term in early Indian religious discourse. For Manu, Dharma is grounded in the Veda.

> The root of Dharma is the entire Veda, and also the remembered tradition (*smriti*) and virtuous conduct of those who know the Veda, the actions of wise people, and what is pleasing to the soul. Any Dharma that Manu has declared for anyone—all that is stated in the Veda, for it is the basis of all knowledge. A wise person should consider this fully through the eye of knowledge and then follow one's own Dharma, with the Veda as its authority, for those who follow Dharma based on the Veda and remembered tradition will obtain a good reputation in this world and an unsurpassed happiness when they pass on. (MDhSh 2.6-9)

Dharma may be singular in its Vedic foundation, but it is also diverse in its application. For that reason, Manu speaks of "one's own Dharma" (*sva-dharma*). Dharma applies to all members of human society, but it differs according to class, gender, stage of life, and other distinguishing individual factors. Even so, Manu asserts that all who follow their own proper Dharma will achieve the desirable results of a good reputation while alive and a happy outcome afterward.

The Career of the Smarta Brahmin

As a historical work, scholars date Manu's Dharmashastra to roughly the second century CE. The Dharmashastra grows out of the earlier Dharmasutra literature of Smarta Brahmins loyal to the Vedic tradition and expands its range. Here, too, the lives of Brahmins are a major concern, and the male Brahmin householder continues to be a model and religious ideal. Manu is extravagant in praising him: “The Brahmin is lord of all creation, according to Dharma, because he arose from the highest part of the creator, because he came first, and because he bears in himself the Veda” (MDhSh 1.93). But Manu extends his attention well beyond the Brahmin focus of the Dharmasutras. Following the paradigm first set out in the *Rig Veda*’s Purushasukta hymn, Manu envisions all of society as a hierarchical organic unity, with the four ranked classes assigned appropriate duties based on that original emanation. The Brahmin class came first and emerged from the head, the highest part, of that Highest Being. This orderly society, in Manu’s view, requires the supervision of a king guided by knowledgeable Brahmins. His guidebook to Dharma, therefore, addresses the lives of Brahmins, the duties of all classes, the training and conduct of the king, the administration of justice—all necessary to realizing the ideal of a Dharma-based social order as Manu envisions it.

In Manu’s righteous society, each of the four classes has distinct responsibilities. These were set out in the beginning by the Creator.

> For the preservation of this entire creation, the Splendid One assigned separate duties to those born of his mouth, arms, thighs, and feet. For Brahmins, he assigned reciting and teaching the Veda, offering and officiating at sacrifices, giving and receiving gifts. To the Kshatriya, he assigned protection of all creatures, giving gifts, offering sacrifices, reciting the Veda, and remaining unattached to sensory objects. To the Vaishya, he assigned protection of animals, giving gifts, offering sacrifices, reciting the Veda, and pursuing livelihoods such as commerce, moneylending, and plough agriculture. To the Shudra, the Lord assigned one task only—to serve these other classes without resentment. (MDhSh 1.87-91)

Within this class system, the Veda constitutes a key status marker. The three upper groups are “twice-born” classes, since those males are eligible to be initiated into the Veda. Hence they are qualified to recite the Veda themselves and offer sacrifices on their own behalf. But only Brahmins are entitled to transmit and teach others the Veda and to officiate at sacrifices on behalf of others. The Brahmin stands at the head of society, and even among Brahmin males there are further rankings. Learned Brahmins are good, those who perform rites are better, and experts in the Veda are best of all.

The life path of the Smarta Brahmin male, accordingly, rests on the foundation of the Veda. As in the Dharmasutras, Manu’s Dharmashastra emphasizes the study and continuing recitation of the Veda, the performance of domestic Veda-based rites such as the "five great sacrifices," and the maintenance of an austere mode of life. Manu codifies this life path into a scheme of four stages (*ashramas*): student, householder, forest dweller, and wandering ascetic. Manu clearly favors the Brahmin householder as the one whose activities support all society. "Just as all beings subsist depending on air, so all the stages of life depend on the householder. Since the householder supports those in the other three life stages every day with knowledge and food, the householder is the preeminent stage of life" (MDhSh 3.77-78). With his five great sacrifices, the Brahmin householder extends his support to the Vedic sages, the ancestor spirits, the gods, the semidivine *bhutas*, and the guests.

Despite this strong preference, Manu acknowledges the value of renunciation and incorporates it into the final two stages of life. He allows that one may seek the more individual spiritual goals of the ascetic. But, he insists, a Brahmin (or other twice-born male) should only enter these stages after he has fulfilled his social obligations as student and householder. This includes ensuring that his lineage continues. "When a householder sees that he is wrinkled and gray, and when he sees the son of his son, then he may take refuge in the forest" (MDhSh 6.2). Clearly Manu wishes to counter the Shramana groups like the Buddhists and Jains, who encouraged renunciation at any age. If a Brahmin should undertake renunciation without having studied the Vedas, fathered sons, and offered householder sacrifices, Manu warns, he will sink into the underworld (MDhSh 6.37).

In the first step of his retirement from these duties, the Brahmin removes himself from home and village and becomes a forest dweller (*vanaprastha*). He may take his wife with him or else entrust her to the care of their male children. He carries with him the domestic fires and continues in his new location the chief domestic activities of this earlier life, recitation of the Veda and the five great sacrifices. But he gradually assumes a more austere way of life, wearing bark garments, leaving beard uncut, matting his hair. He may inflict still more rigorous mortifications on his body. During the summer, for example, he may follow the five-fire vow, during the rainy season stay outside with only the clouds for shelter, and in the winter months wear wet clothing. This harsh regime may lead him to the next step, as a full ascetic renouncer.

The Brahmin who chooses this final stage gives away all his possessions, deposits the sacred fires within himself, and wanders off alone. There is no option for his wife to accompany him in this final step. His only possessions will be a bowl for begging, the foot of a tree for shelter, rags for clothing, solitude, and equanimity to all this. (This parallels the austere promise the Buddha Shakyamuni gave to new members of his following.) Manu says nothing about Vedic recitation at this stage, and the ascetic's sacrificial practices are solely internal ones. Now, the Brahmin engages in the yogic practices of breath control and meditation. And through meditation, the wandering ascetic may attain oneness with *brahman*, the final liberation as envisioned by the Upanishad teachers.

As for women, Manu is notorious for his insistence that females be dependent on males at every stage of their lives.

> When she is a child, a young woman, or an older woman, a female should not carry out any duty independently, even in her own house. As a child she should live under control of her father, as a young woman under her husband, and under her sons when her husband has passed away. A woman should not have independence. She should not wish to separate herself from her father, husband, or sons. By separating from them she would bring disgrace on both families. (MDhSh 5.147-149)

Manu stresses the ideal virtues of the good housewife: cheerfulness, cleanliness, and frugality. She should honor her husband as her god and not carry out any religious rites on her own. Manu's emphatic concern here appears to rest on the patriarchal idea that females are particularly susceptible to sensual pleasures. Better able to gain self-mastery, males should exercise control over the women dependent on them. But if a woman sticks to this female Dharma of dependence and self-restraint, she too gains rewards in this life and in the afterlife—with her husband. "The wife who is never unfaithful to her husband and keeps her mind, speech, and body restrained is called a good woman by good people, and she attains the heaven of her husband" (MDhSh 5.165).

The Shape of the Righteous Society

Brahmins may be the support of all, as Manu sees it, but they require in turn a supportive social order. First of all, the righteous society of Dharma requires a king. When the world was without a king, Manu reminds his audience, people fled in all directions out of fear. In order that all could be protected, the Lord created a king by extracting everlasting particles from the deities Indra, Vayu, Yama, Surya, Agni, Varuna, Chandra, and Kubera. Manu's origin story largely parallels the one Bhishma tells to Yudhishthira in the *Mahabharata*, but it emphasizes Vedic deities and omits the role of Vishnu. Because the king bears these divine elements, he should be regarded himself as a great deity. The king holds the rod of punishment, to thwart disorder. With the king acting as protector of order, people in all classes and at all stages of life are enabled to pursue their own individual Dharma.

Manu gives much greater attention to the topic of kingship than was the case in the earlier Dharmasutra literature. He covers briefly many aspects of statecraft that Kautilya does in his treatise, and Manu no doubt borrowed from experts in the developing science of Artha. Like Kautilya, Manu stresses the importance of education and self-mastery among the royal elite. He summarizes the formation of the royal bureaucracy, the strategies of external state relations, and the administration of law. But much more than Kautilya, Manu emphasizes the importance of Brahmins, both as royal ministers and as recipients of royal patronage. It is clear that Manu envisions important roles for Brahmin experts in the science of Dharma at court as advisers and jurists. At the same time he stresses that the wise king will take a role in supporting Smarta Brahmin communities and their Vedic educational institutions. The king "should honor Brahmins who have returned from their teachers' homes" after completing their Veda study, says Manu, "for the Veda is said to be an imperishable treasure for kings" (MDhSh 7.82). In this view, the study and transmission of the Veda is a public good for the kingdom. And the king reaps rewards for his beneficence. Manu sets out a strong hierarchy among recipients of royal donations. If the king makes a donation to a non-Brahmin, he receives a merit equal to the value of the gift. Here Manu has in mind gifts to Shramana mendicants, most likely. A donation to a "Brahmin in name only" (i.e., not learned in the Veda) warrants double merit; one to a learned Brahmin gains 100,000 times the merit; and one given to a Veda master showers infinite reward on the royal donor.

The full shape of a righteous society ruled by a righteous king rests on the four classes. Drawing on the Vedic origin story, Manu portrays these as natural, given at the dawn of creation and necessary for its proper preservation. These classes are assigned occupational roles according to their inborn natures (*svabhava*). And they are ranked according to their access to the Veda. The upper three classes are "twice-born," since their second birth comes with initiation into the Veda. Below them, Manu says, Shudras have only a single birth, since they are excluded from the Veda. There is no fifth class, he emphasizes.

Within this clear ideal order, however, Manu also recognized the existence of other corporate groups. The Dharmashastras most often call these the *jatis* (birth-groups), and in modern times this designation is generally translated as "caste" (from the Portuguese term for "class"). Manu fits these into his social hierarchy by asserting that these groups derive from the mixture of the four primary classes due to transgressions of the proper order of things. Males and females ought to mix with members of their own class. However, Manu admits, this is not always the case. "The mixture of classes originates from adultery across classes, from marriage with those one should not marry, and from abandonment of one's own proper occupations" (MDhSh 10.24). Historically, the groups he mentions mostly represent real existing communities of the time, but Manu's theory of origination places them all in a subordinate role to the purer varna classes. Manu goes on to set out a kind of matrix of interbreeding. A Brahmin male and a Vaishya female produce an Ambashta, a Brahmin male with a Shudra female give birth to a Nishada, a Kshatriya male and a Brahmin female lead to a Suta, and so on. Manu observes that many of the resulting birth-groups follow specific occupations or forms of livelihood: ship workers, animal trappers, medical workers, tradesmen, fishermen, carpenters, and others. This enables him to generate the historical complexity of social and occupational groupings in early India from the Vedic model of four original classes.[14]

Among the derivative communities, there are some that are truly at the bottom of the social heap. These are the Chandalas and the Shvapachas ("dog cookers"). Manu sets out special restrictions applying to them. They must reside outside the town and must not venture into town at night. They get their clothes from the dead, and they eat out of broken vessels. They carry out unwanted tasks, such as serving as executioners for the king, and they carry away the corpses of those without relatives to do so. Those who follow Dharma should have nothing to do with Chandalas, says Manu. If they do, they are considered to be polluted by that contact, and they should take a bath to restore their normal state of purity. From this, the Chandalas and other deeply marginalized groups in early India and subsequently came to be known as "untouchables." In modern times their descendants are preferably designated as Dalits.

Manu and Changing Times

Manu's ranking of a Veda master infinitely above a non-Brahmin recipient reminds us that his Smarta Brahmin audience was in competition with other religious communities in early India, most notably the Buddhists and other Shramana communities, for support from kings and other elites. If we view Manu not as the mythical "first man" passing on parts of Brahman's original treatise, but as a human author and expert in Dharma composing his text in northern India during the Kushana Era, we can place the Dharmashastra in its broader historical setting. In relation to the earlier Smarta Brahmin Dharmasutras, Manu's treatise was an expansive and innovative step forward. But in relation to the dynamic Indian society of the period, Manu articulates a conservative response. Manu's compelling vision of an orderly righteous society is in many ways a throwback. Manu reiterates the key values of the Vedic tradition—the centrality of the Veda, the efficacy of sacrifice in binding humans and gods in shared prosperity, and the preeminent status of the Brahmin male householder—in the face of a changing and expanding religious landscape.

Vedic Brahmins faced multiple challenges in the early centuries CE. First, they confronted competition for economic resources. Buddhists and other Shramana groups had been highly successful in gaining patronage from affluent social groups, thereby reducing the provisions that could be directed toward Vedic ritual practices. Against this, Manu emphasizes the great value—infinitely greater—of donations made to support Brahmin masters of the Veda. Brahmins had also found themselves challenged for religious primacy in the royal courts. Starting during the Mauryan period, Shramana groups challenged the older mutuality of Kshatriya and Brahmin. Some imperial rulers like Ashoka and Kanishka had allied themselves forthrightly with Buddhist advisers. In response, Manu emphasizes the importance of maintaining educated Brahmins as court advisers and royal officials. More generally, Manu refers to the Shramana groups as "atheists" (*nastikas*) and advocates a policy of social exclusion. He includes atheists in his long list of those who committed sins that entailed loss of class—along with cow killers, adulterers, and usurers. A respectable Brahmin householder should not invite an atheist to ancestral rituals or other domestic rites at his home.

Despite this disdain toward Shramana communities, Manu also recognizes the strength of some of their criticisms of the Vedic order. This is best seen in Manu's treatment of meat-eating. Jains and Buddhists, as we've seen, were deeply critical of the violence in Vedic animal sacrifice and advocated a personal practice of nonviolence, entailing the abstention from the eating of meat. Manu also favors nonviolence and the avoidance of meat.

> One can never obtain meat without doing violence to living beings, and the slaughter of living beings does not lead to heaven. Therefore one should avoid meat. Reflecting that meat originates in the binding and killing of their bodies, one should refrain from all eating of meat . . . There is no greater sinner than the one who wishes to feed his own flesh with the flesh of another creature—unless it is used in sacrifices to the ancestors or the gods. (MDhSh 5.48-52)

Manu inserts an important exception in that final sentence. The time-honored sacrificial use of animals in Vedic rituals, for Manu, takes precedence over the general principle of nonviolence. “The Self-created Brahman himself created animals for the purpose of sacrifice, and sacrifice is for the well-being of the entire world,” proclaims Manu. “Therefore, within sacrifice, killing is not killing” (MDhSh 5.39). Dharma itself arises from the Veda, and so when the Veda prescribes sacrificial slaughter of animals, that should not be classified as violence antithetical to Dharma.

Manu is wary also of the new practices of image worship and the fledgling shrines for deities. Some Brahmin shakhas, as we have seen, invested themselves during this period in developing new protocols for honoring gods in image form. Manu suggests that a Brahmin should show honor by circumambulating an image-shrine, just as he should circumambulate other worthy objects such as a cow, ghee, a crossroads, or an honored tree. But as for those priests (*devalakas*) who officiate at such a shrine, they, too, should be shunned, just as much as one should avoid atheists.[15] Neither does Manu place much value in the new divine claimants to supremacy, such as Vishnu Narayana and his avataras in the Sanskrit epics. For Manu, the older Vedic gods still serve, though only the creator god Brahman, the *svayambhu* or “self-born one,” receive special attention in Manu’s pantheon.

During a period of far-reaching trade and broad cultural contacts throughout the Asian ecumene, Manu advises Smarta Brahmins to stay within their privileged zone of the Aryavarta. As we’ve seen, Manu and others in classical India designated certain lands as the “home of the Indo-Aryans.” This included the lands from the Himalayas in the north to the Vindhya mountains to the south, stretching across the subcontinent from the Arabian Sea in the west to the Bay of Bengal in the east. Manu adds that this territory, where the blackbuck antelope wanders naturally, is known as the land suitable for sacrifice. Beyond that is the land of the Others (*mlecchas*). “Twice-borns should make a diligent effort to live in the Aryavarta,” says Manu, “but a Shudra can live in any land, if pressed for livelihood” (MDhSh 2.24). The stay-at-home policy that Manu recommends, especially for Brahmin religious specialists, offers a striking contrast with the Buddhist order of the Kushana Era, whose missionary monks took advantage of the open trade routes to spread their teachings to far-flung new territories. It contrasts also with the more expansive, pan-Indian imperial perspectives seen in the Sanskrit epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Manu’s agenda was to preserve an older order in its purity, at a time of change that was disorienting for Brahmins loyal to the Veda.

Even so, Manu’s treatise and the developing science of Dharma proved to be resilient, and it has had a broad, long-lasting impact on Indian society right up to the present. Manu's treatise is the earliest surviving Dharmashastra, but writing a century or two later, Yajnavalkya lists twenty authors of Dharmashastras.[16] In classical and medieval India, kings did endow the educational institutions of Vedic Brahmins, much as Manu advised, and recorded their gifts of *brahmadeyas* (Brahmin landholdings) in the permanent form of copper-plate inscriptions. Educated Brahmins in turn brought their knowledge of Dharma to the royal courts. From the eighth century on, learned Brahmin scholars wrote commentaries and digests of the Dharmashastra literature, establishing it as a significant human science within Indian society. And when the British established a beachhead of colonial control over eastern India in the eighteenth century and sought to govern Indians according to "their own legal codes," they turned to Brahmin pandits (*panditas*) and the Dharmashastras—with vast and often unfortunate consequences. But that is another story.[17]

Moksha and Meditation

In his master treatise, Brahman sets off the fourth aim of human life, which he calls Moksha, or liberation, as a special category of purpose. And rightly so, since the other three involve primarily this-worldly ends, while Moksha involves a liberation from worldly suffering or bondage. In religious studies, the term "soteriology" (from a Greek word for "salvation") denotes the disciplined study of doctrines and practices aimed at this transcendent goal.

Human salvation or liberation, as we've seen, is a recurrent concern in the religious cultures of early India. From the time of the Upanishads and the formation of Shramana communities, Moksha was broadly proclaimed as a possible goal. It could be pursued and achieved through individual human effort. Moksha was highly desirable; many considered it the "highest good," the ultimate good life. It was not, however, an everyday goal. Moksha was reserved for the most committed religious specialists. It required a deliberate and rigorous religious training and sustained meditation.

Varieties of Moksha

In Mircea Eliade's classic 1954 work, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, the historian of religion introduced four "kinetic ideas" at the core of Indian spirituality.[18] These can serve as a useful point of departure for any discussion of soteriology in early India. First, he says, there is a law of universal causality, *karman*, which is closely connected with worldly suffering and with the assumption of transmigration. The second kinetic idea is the process that engenders the cosmos and snares human beings in ignorance and bondage. This is often called *maya*, or "cosmic illusion." Third, Indians identify an "absolute reality" that offers an alternative to the suffering and limitation caused by karman and ignorance. This is called by various names—the transcendent, the unconditioned, *brahman*, Nirvana. Here I am using the most common general term, Moksha, which points particularly to the liberation or salvation it offers from whatever binds us. Fourth are the effective techniques for attaining this absolute reality or Moksha. These methods, Eliade states, constitute Yoga. One will notice that Eliade's kinetic ideas parallel the four "noble truths" that the Buddha Shakyamuni had set out long before in his first discourse at Sarnath.

Like other key terms in Indic religious cultures, however, Moksha does not have a single uncontested meaning. While the term always refers to the endpoint in a process of individual salvation, there are basic points of disagreement and debate. These are grounded in the basic ontological presuppositions held by the different schools of thought. What is the fundamental problem to which Moksha is the solution? What is the entity that experiences this problematic worldly situation and seeks a solution? How can this transcendent state be understood or described? Who is qualified to pursue it? What are the most effective means of reaching that goal? And what happens when a human does attain the transcendent end of Moksha? In the early centuries CE, teachers in the various religious cultures of India addressed these basic issues, and argued over them, in a series of foundational works.

The Jain preceptor Umasvati set out a Jain understanding of bondage and Moksha in his *Tattvartha Sutras*, an authoritative Sanskrit work of the second century CE.[19] The non-theistic Jain ontology begins with the soul. According to Jain premises, there are multiple individual souls inhabiting all kinds of physical bodies. Umasvati distinguished two fundamental categories of souls: those living in worldly *samsara* and those that are liberated. The great goal of the soul living in worldly *samsara*, he begins, is to attain Moksha, which he defines as perfect knowledge, perfect intuition, and perfect bliss. However, in worldly conditions souls are hindered from these perfections. The predicament of all worldly souls revolves around *karman*. Actions—whether of body, speech, or mind—cause an inflow of karman, which adheres like particles of darkening matter to the soul and binds it to the world. Spiritual development leading away from worldly confinement and toward Moksha involves stopping the acquisition of karman. This can be done, first of all, by observing the five vows, the ethical foundations of the religious life, which prevent the most pernicious karman. Bodily austerities can wear off existing karman, as well as inhibit new karman. Likewise, Umasvati advocates meditation as another means of removing and preventing karman. Meditation involves "the concentration of one's thought on a single object by a person with good bone-joints," says Umasvati, and then he goes on to analyze the various types of Jain meditations.[20] As deluding karman is eliminated, omniscience arises. And with the complete elimination of all types of karman, the soul attains Moksha. At this point, in the Jain understanding, the liberated soul soars upward to the border of cosmic space, in perfect stasis and autonomy, which the Jains call Kaivalya.

Like the Jains, the non-theistic Buddhist religious community concerned itself fundamentally with the attainment of Moksha. From the time of the Buddha Shakyamuni, Buddhists most often used the term Nirvana, which emphasizes the "extinguishing" of worldly suffering and subsequent rebirth. Buddhists insisted that there exists no independent, enduring "self" or "soul" (*atman*). So distinctive was this denial that others characterized Buddhists as *anatmavadins*, those who proclaim the "no-soul" theory. From an early time Buddhists held to ideas of thoroughgoing impermanence and dependent causality. With the rise of the Madhyamika (Middle Way) philosophical school within the broader Mahayana developments of the early centuries CE, the anti-essentialism inherent in these formative Buddhist ideas was stretched into a universal principle. In the works of Nagarjuna, dating to the second century CE, all objects and categories are denied any fundamental or essential being. They can be characterized only by the negative term *shunyata*, emptiness. And in the Yogachara school of Buddhism established in the fourth century CE by two brothers from Purushapura, Asanga and Vasubandhu, Buddhist anti-essentialism is directed at everyday phenomenological experience. Yogachara Buddhism (also identified as the "Mind-Only" school) insisted that our everyday notion that objects of experience exist external to and independent of our own perceiving consciousness is a fundamental form of ignorance and a cause of suffering. Yogachara proponents emphasize that one must overcome the mistaken division between oneself as a perceiving subject and the world as perceived objects.

These ontological commitments form the basis for the Buddhist soteriological path. Buddhists often formalize the route from basic worldly suffering to enlightenment or Moksha in five stages (*pancha-marga*, literally the "five roads"). The first two Buddhist roads involve preparation. The Buddhist seeker begins the quest by cultivating moral conduct, developing the practice of meditation, and learning important doctrinal tenets. These preparations lead one to the crucial third stage, the "road of insight." Here the seeker comes to a direct and intense perception of the true nature of reality just as it is—that is, as the Buddhist teachings portray it. Here is where different emphases in the path may occur. A Buddhist monk or nun of the Theravada might come to a profound recognition of the four noble truths. A Mahayana-oriented seeker might realize the deep truth of emptiness, and a seeker following the Yogachara orientation could experience a transformation in consciousness where subject and object are no longer bifurcated. In all cases, this insight is transformative. The subsequent stage in this Buddhist route involves the cultivation of these insights and abandoning any lingering afflictions. The fifth and final "road of completion" is synonymous with attaining one's goal. The enlightened Buddhist recognizes that all fetters are eliminated and will not return. One is freed from all rebirth since no causal force of karman remains. With the doctrine of no-soul, there is no enduring entity to fly to the top of the cosmos or go anywhere. There is Nirvana only.

Groups in the Vedic lineage also promoted the pursuit of Moksha. Two important soteriological works compiled in the early centuries CE are the *Brahmasutras* of Badarayana and the *Yogasutras* of Patanjali. Both articulated conceptions of Moksha and set out methods for its attainment, but with differing ontological premises. Badarayana takes the monist orientation of the Upanishads as the foundation for seeking the highest state, while Patanjali grounds his formulation of the Yoga path on the dualist premises of the Samkhya ("enumerationist") school.

Meditation on the Vedic brahman

Badarayana composed the *Brahmasutras* in the early fifth century CE, as best we can tell. But he was part of a long learned tradition of reflections on the Vedic scriptures among Brahmin intellectuals. These interpretive considerations led to two important early *darshanas*, or philosophical schools. The Mimamsa ("investigation") school concerned itself with the interpretation of Vedic texts pertaining to the ritual performance of sacrifice. Its foundational work was the *Mimamsasutras* of Jaimini, composed several centuries before Badarayana. The Vedanta school focused on the more speculative portion of the Vedic corpus, the Upanishads. Badarayana refers to seven other earlier Vedanta authorities, but his *Brahmasutras* seems to have supplanted their texts and become the foundational work of the Vedanta school. According to the Vedanta, the Upanishads provide a comprehensive vision of the underlying principles of the cosmos and a soteriology by which an individual may gain Moksha within that Vedic cosmos. The *Brahmasutras* sets out to give a more systematic and concise presentation of that vision.

Badarayana grounds his guide for the attainment of Moksha on ontological presuppositions drawn directly from the Upanishads. First is the fundamental principle of *brahman*. This is the animating essence of the cosmos, "from which all things come, by which they exist, and into which they return upon destruction," as Aleksandor Uskokov succinctly puts it.[21] As the creative force behind things, *brahman* also enters into all beings. The defining characteristic of *brahman*, says Badarayana, is bliss. In the common Vedanta formula, *brahman* is *sat-chit-ananda*: fundamentally real, conscious, and blissful. At the same time, *brahman* eludes positive description. As Yajnavalkya stated in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, one can only say it is "not this, not that." It cannot be perceived in the ordinary, empirical ways we know things in the world, and it cannot be known through inference. Rather, says Badarayana, one can only know *brahman* through the Veda and, more specifically, through the Upanishads. It resides there in the sacred scriptural words (*shabda*). The Upanishads should not be viewed as the teachings of human teachers like Yajnavalkya or Uddalaka Aruni. Rather, the Vedanta school asserts that the Veda is *apaurusheya*, nonhuman in origin and therefore not subject to human fallibility.

The second key ontological category Badarayana draws from the Upanishads is the *atman*, usually translated as "soul." The individual human soul transmigrates, as many schools of thought in early India assume. It moves from one body to another, in a seemingly endless cycle of deaths and rebirths. For Vedanta, the individual atman partakes of the universal *brahman*. As it resides in all creation, *brahman* resides within the embodied soul as the "Self of the self."[22] However, that essential sharing in the *brahman* is normally concealed from the embodied self, due to the power of karman.

This is the ordinary human situation, as the Vedanta school sees it: an eternal soul (atman) dwelling within a physical body and transmigrating through multiple rebirths due to its bonding karman. But within this atman also resides *brahman* as its inner essence. And that inner *brahman* is the key to the possibility of Moksha. It is possible, the *Brahmasutras* assert, for the soul to overcome the concealment of *brahman* and to realize that it shares in the *brahman* as its essential nature. The profound realization by the embodied atman of its essential *brahman*-ness brings about an escape from the cycle of transmigration. For the human soul, this realization is the highest good, Moksha.

The method for attaining this salvific goal, in the *Brahmasutras*, follows a path of knowledge. It is not the fox-like knowledge of many things, in Archilochus's (and Isaiah Berlin's) well-known distinction, but rather the hedgehog-like knowing of just one profound thing. That is, the path does not lead through empirical or worldly knowledge. It aims instead at a deep realization, *vidya* ("wisdom," that which is to be known, from the same root as the word Veda).

This transformative epiphany is to be attained through meditation. Badarayana speaks of this activity as *upasana*, or "sitting with," a synonym for other terms like *dhyana* and *samadhi*. The practice of meditation was shared across multiple religious communities in early India. The elementary practices of physical stillness and inward focus are common to most. But the object of meditative focus often differs. In Badarayana's guide, the meditator should fix his focus (for it is necessarily a male) on the text of the Veda, or more precisely on certain key statements from the Upanishads that give rise to the realization of *brahman*. These are known as *brahma-vidyas*. For example, Yajnavalkya's teaching to his female interlocutor Gargi in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* may serve as a seed to contemplation on the "imperishable" *brahman*. Uddalaka's instruction to his son Shvetaketu is the basis for the meditation that Being (*sat*) is all-encompassing. Reciting and meditating on these and other brahma-vidyas enables the seeker to realize, ever more deeply, that *brahman* is one's essential self.

This is a long-term practice. Since this meditation requires the recitation and reflection on the Vedas, it is restricted to those initiated males of the three highest classes and is most amenable no doubt for those of the Brahmin class. In Manu's Dharmashastra model of four life-stages for a Brahmin male, the lifelong practice of Veda recitation is inculcated during the student years then maintained during life as a married householder. One can envision the recitations becoming less concerned with sacrificial practice and more focused on the Upanishads and the brahma-vidyas in the later two stages of renunciatory life, where Moksha may supplant Dharma as the highest priority. Badarayana also recognizes the option of renunciation that bypasses the stage of householder altogether, for an especially determined seeker, something Manu would find problematic. When that meditation becomes perfect, one is said to be a "knower of *brahman*," a *vidvan*. He is free from past karman, and subsequent actions do not cause new karman to adhere. But this is still not full Moksha, since one must still experience the remaining karman that is causing one's present embodiment. The vidvan goes on meditating as long as he lives. With the ripening of that final remnant of karman and the death of the body, the knower of *brahman* is fully and finally liberated. Death for the knower brings a full manifestation of the essential unity of the soul with *brahman*, and no further bodily rebirth.

Badarayana's *Brahmasutras* was foundational for the Vedanta school, with its several contentious branch-schools. Subsequent Vedanta commentators considered the *Brahmasutras* and the corpus of principal Upanishads, along with the

Bhagavad Gita, as the three points of departure (*prasthana-traya*) for the development of Vedanta philosophy and practice. In later centuries, this gave rise to a highly erudite and argumentative literature of explication and interpretation of these core texts. Most famous among the later Vedantins are the Advaita (nondualist) proponent Shankara of the eighth century, the Vishishthadvaita (qualified nondualist) leader Ramanuja in the twelfth century, and the Dvaita (dualist) advocate Madhva in the thirteenth century.

Patanjali's Guide to Yoga

As we have seen, yoga has ancient roots in the Indian soil. Ascetic practices of bodily austerities, mental concentration, breath control, and meditation date back to the milieu of the Upanishads and the Shramana seekers, if not even earlier. Development and reflection on these practices continued among renunciatory communities of religious specialists over the ensuing centuries, among Jains, Buddhists, Brahmins, and others. Works like the *Bhagavad Gita* promoted yogic disciplines as suitable and effective for those living worldly lives as well as for renouncers. Yoga aimed at Moksha was an ongoing, changing, and debated feature of the religious landscape of early India.

In the fourth century CE, Patanjali sought to present a systematic account and practical guide in his *Yogasutras*.[23] He describes practices and forms of meditation shared with other communities, but his account of Yoga is based on ontological premises of the dualist Samkhya school. Samkhya was a long-standing and influential philosophical orientation in early India, described in the Upanishads, the *Mahabharata*, and other older texts. In the fourth century, approximately contemporary with Patanjali, Ishvarakrishna gave a systematic formulation of Samkhya metaphysics in his *Samkhyakarikas*.

Patanjali sets out the main human problem and the goal of Yoga practice succinctly in his opening statements. The problem, he says, is that we as observers identify with the turnings of our thoughts. The aim of Yoga practice is to still the turnings of thought. The resulting cessation of mental turbulence enables the soul to stand in its true relation to the world, as autonomous observer or onlooker. To understand this terse formulation, it is necessary to look at the basic ontological presuppositions of Samkhya.

According to Samkhya, there are two fundamental categories: *purusha* (translated as "spirit" or "soul") and *prakriti* (nature). Samkhya postulates a plurality of souls; each person has an embodied purusha that lies behind all manifest faculties and activities of experience, thought, and perception. Purusha is pure consciousness, but it is not the same as the contents of consciousness. (And this purusha, it is clear, is not in any way the same as the Vedic Purusha, the single primordial being of the cosmos.) In the *Samkhyakarikas*, Ishvarakrishna defines *purusha* as witness, autonomous, indifferent, inactive, and the observing subject.

Prakriti denotes the source of everything else. Samkhya analysis traces a process of transformation or evolution (*parinama*) by which the manifest world that we experience comes into being out of unmanifest prakriti. This evolution moves from subtle categories like intellect, ego, and mind, toward sensory faculties like sight and smell, to the sensory qualities that these faculties perceive, such as visibility and odor, to the most material of elements like earth and water. It is important to note here that things we might consider as parts of our inner selves (intellect, ego, mind) also evolve from prakriti. Samkhya dualism is not the Cartesian one of mind and matter, since both mind and matter evolve from a single source. Ishvarakrishna characterizes prakriti as unstable, dynamic, changing, fluctuating. The material world and our experience of it, accordingly, is active and diverse. Ultimately, for Samkhya, it is unsatisfying.

What is the problem here? Purushas enter into the manifest forms of prakriti, interact with them, and come to identify with them. Most fundamentally, according to Samkhya ontology, we are purushas who identify our selfhood not with pure consciousness, but with the fluctuating, ephemeral, unstable aspects of our experienced world: our intellects, our egos, our minds, our bodies, our capacities to act and to perceive, and even with material possessions outside ourselves. This erroneous identification leads to suffering. We fail to discriminate between soul and nature, between purusha and prakriti.

The goal therefore is to make a separation, in effect to liberate the soul from its involvement in manifest nature. But how can this best be done? Here is where Ishvarakrishna and Patanjali take diverging soteriological paths. Samkhya stresses the role of knowledge. A purusha must make use of its intellect to realize its distinction from all the evolutes of prakriti. This is a gradual task of analysis and discrimination, and it leads the purusha ultimately to a state of autonomy (*kaivalya*), where it can act according to its essential nature, as a pure observer. Patanjali takes a more active approach. Yoga requires disciplined action, to still the turnings of thought and finally to free the conscious soul from all its entanglements.

Patanjali's *Yogasutras* are best known for the scheme of "eight limbs" (*ashtanga*) of Yoga practice. These form a progressive path of increasingly inward steps, leading to ever-deeper states of stillness and meditation. Patanjali begins with five moral restraints that any practitioner should adopt as a starting point: nonviolence, truthfulness, avoidance of theft, celibacy, and nongreediness. The same five ethical foundations of the religious life appear in early Jain and Buddhist teachings, as we have seen, and Patanjali asserts that they are universal principles. One need not be a Brahmin initiated into the Veda, or a Buddhist or Jain initiated into a monastic community to enter onto the path of Yoga. Along with the restraints, Patanjali also lists a series of vows or observances: purification of the body, self-contentment, self-restraint, study of scripture, and dedication to the Lord of Yoga. (This Lord is sometimes identified as Shiva, but Patanjali's approach does not rely on a theistic orientation.) Together the restraints and observances form the moral and behavioral foundation for successful practice of the following stages of Yoga.

The third limb is posture or *asana*. Elaboration of this limb has evolved into the proliferation of positions and movements in modern postural yoga, often referred to as *hatha-yoga*. But for Patanjali, posture means finding a comfortable position in which one can be steady and easy, relaxing all effort. This steadiness makes possible the subsequent limbs. Fourth is control of the breath (*pranayama*), in which the Yoga practitioner carefully regulates the rhythm of inhalation, retention, and exhalation. This leads to the fifth limb, withdrawal of the senses (*pratyahara*). In early Indian psychology, it was understood that our sense faculties—sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch—reach outward into the world to engage with their objects. To withdraw the senses, the yogi must "reverse the course" or "cultivate the opposite." That is, the discipline of Yoga, as Patanjali presents it, requires an exercise of human will to go against "natural" forms of ordinary activity. Stilling the body, controlling the breath, and reining in the senses allow one to enter into meditation.

For limbs six, seven, and eight, Patanjali describes three levels of meditative practice: concentration (*dharana*), meditation (*dhyana*), and pure contemplation (*samadhi*). These involve increasingly subtle states of mind. Concentration requires that the practitioner fix one's mind on a single spot. This could be a physical one like the tip of the nose, or it could be a mental one like a visualized image. In a theistic setting, for example, one could focus on an interior visualization of Shiva as the Lord of Yoga. At the next level, one meditates on a single object without any interruption or interfering thoughts or perceptions. Finally, at the stage of pure contemplation, Patanjali says, there is a dissolving of all distinctions between the meditating subject and the object of contemplation. Here at the highest stage, despite the ontological differences, Patanjali's account of meditative states shows clear parallels with those of the other schools, such as the Buddhists of the Yogachara school.

Through the practice of Yoga in this manner, Patanjali claims, one acquires supernatural powers (*siddhi*). The Yoga adept can know the past and future and can remember previous births. One can gain extraordinary awareness of the thoughts of others. One can enter into the bodies of other persons and can become invisible oneself. These great powers, however, are not the same as true Moksha and can even become a distraction that hinders one from that highest aspiration. As Patanjali begins his *Yogasutras* with the central human problem of endlessly turning thoughts, he closes with the attainment of liberation, employing Samkhya terms. Moksha, he concludes, involves the "reversal of the manifest qualities of prakriti, which are devoid of meaning for the purusha such that the power of pure consciousness is established in its true form, which is autonomous" (YS 4.34) As the translator Barbara Stoler Miller suggests, citing T. S. Eliot, the Yoga conception of Moksha finds the "still point of the turning world" in perfect equilibrium and spiritual calm.[24]

12

The Gupta Era: Religious Cultures of Court and Beyond (300–500 CE)

TWO MILES OUTSIDE VIDISHA, the old Shunga capital, lie two low white sandstone hills known as Udayagiri, “Sunrise Mountain.” Around the beginning of the fifth century CE, stonecutters excavated a large cave, twenty-two feet long and over twelve feet high, at the base of the hills. Inside the manmade cave, artisans created a remarkable sculpted panel (**Fig. 39**). It depicts a colossal standing figure with the muscular body of a human male and the head of a boar. His left foot presses down on the back of a snake, and his powerful left arm pushes down on his knee. Hanging onto the boar’s tusk is a female figure, identified as the goddess Earth. In front of the imposing man-boar, the captive snake-hooded Naga looks up with hands folded in supplication. Behind the Naga are two smaller human figures, kneeling in attitudes of devotion to the boar. Wavy lines indicate the waters of the ocean. And indeed, the cave was excavated a bit below ground level, so that waters running down the hillside would pool at the base of the sculpture—as indicated by the greater erosion of the stone at the lower portions of the panel. The sculpted man-boar then stands lifting goddess Earth out of veritable waters.

To the left and right of the man-boar stand ranks of figures also in postures of veneration. These have been identified as gods Brahman and Shiva, the musicians Narada and Tumburo, a large group of rishis, and the thirty-three Vedic deities. On the right wall of the cave appear images of the two River Goddesses, Ganga and Yamuna.[1] This sculptural panel, along with many other excavated caves and sculptures on the hills of Udayagiri, date to the reign of Chandragupta II, the Gupta emperor who ruled from 375 to 415 CE.

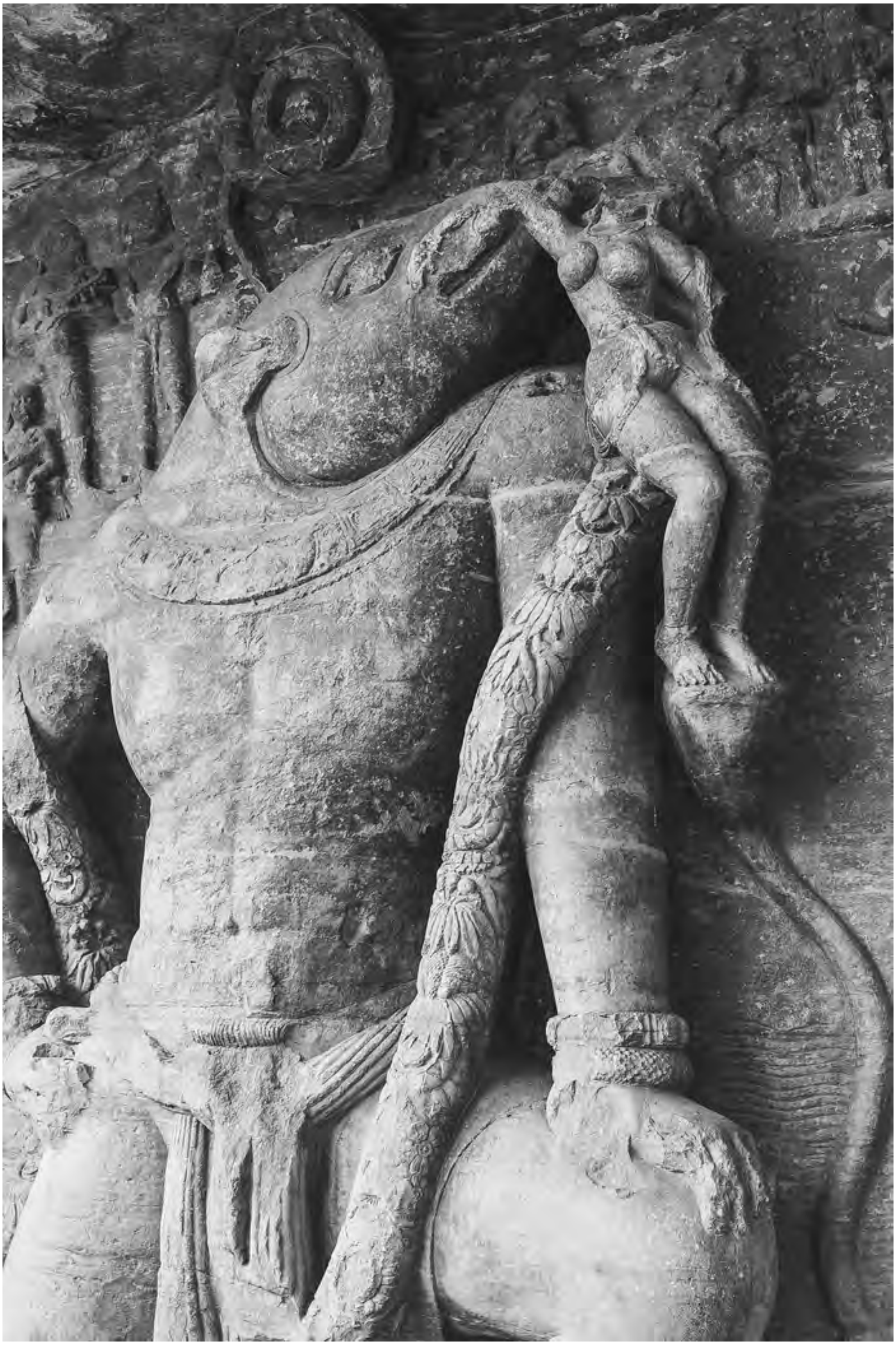


FIGURE 39. Standing Vishnu Varaha, early 5th century CE. Udayagiri, Madhya Pradesh.

The scene depicted in the panel is narrated in the *Vishnu Purana*, a religious work of roughly the same period.[2] At the end of a divine eon (*kalpa*), this Purana relates, all the cosmos returns to sleep in the primordial waters. Then it awakens again to begin a new eon. At the start of our present eon, the Prajapati, or Lord of Creatures, recognizes that the Earth has been submerged in the great ocean and desires to raise her up again. (In some other versions of the story, a nefarious Naga has stolen Earth and imprisons her underwater.) Just as the god Vishnu has taken on forms such as those of a fish and a tortoise in previous eons, now he takes on the form of a boar, Varaha. His boar-body, says the Purana, is made up of Vedic sacrifices. Varaha plunges into the waters. Goddess Earth sees him coming, bows to honor her savior, and sings a grateful song of praise. In her hymn she recognizes that Varaha is the creator, preserver, and destroyer of the cosmos. This singular god, she says, appears in the forms of Brahman, Vishnu, and Shiva, respectively, at the proper times to carry out each phase of the cosmic cycle. Praised by the Earth, Varaha lets out a deep growl, lifts her up from the depths with his tusk, and sets her down. Earth floats on the waters like an enormous boat. The sages seek shelter with Varaha and find refuge among the bristles of the boar's body, which are the Vedas. In the *Vishnu Purana*, this raising of the Earth is an origin story for the beginning of our current eon, the one in which we now live.

Both sculpture and text portray the High God Vishnu in his incarnation as the giant boar Varaha, and his primordial action of rescuing the goddess Earth from the ocean. Both include the gods Brahman and Shiva, and the Purana suggests that these seemingly separate deities are in fact forms or manifestations of a single supreme Deity. Both sculpture and text also connect this form of Vishnu closely with the Vedas: the relief panel with its rows of Vedic rishis and gods, and the Purana with its explicit statements about Vishnu's boar-body made up of sacrifices and bristles of Vedas. Together they form a powerful and innovative representation of the mythical theme of world creation, as related in the developing theistic religious culture of the Vaishnavas.

One can readily see also how this narrative could appeal to Indian rulers establishing new kingdoms. They, too, might wish to see themselves as rescuing the earth from the waters of political chaos, with its threat of *matsyanyaya* (the anarchic rule of fishes), and as establishing a new era of Dharma. The metaphor of an Indian king as Varaha, rescuing the earth from the clutches of submerging misrule, appears in numerous inscriptional *prashastis* from Gupta times onward.[3] It is likely (though we cannot be certain) that the Gupta ruler Chandragupta II saw and endorsed the connection of Varaha to his own royal self when he visited Udayagiri.

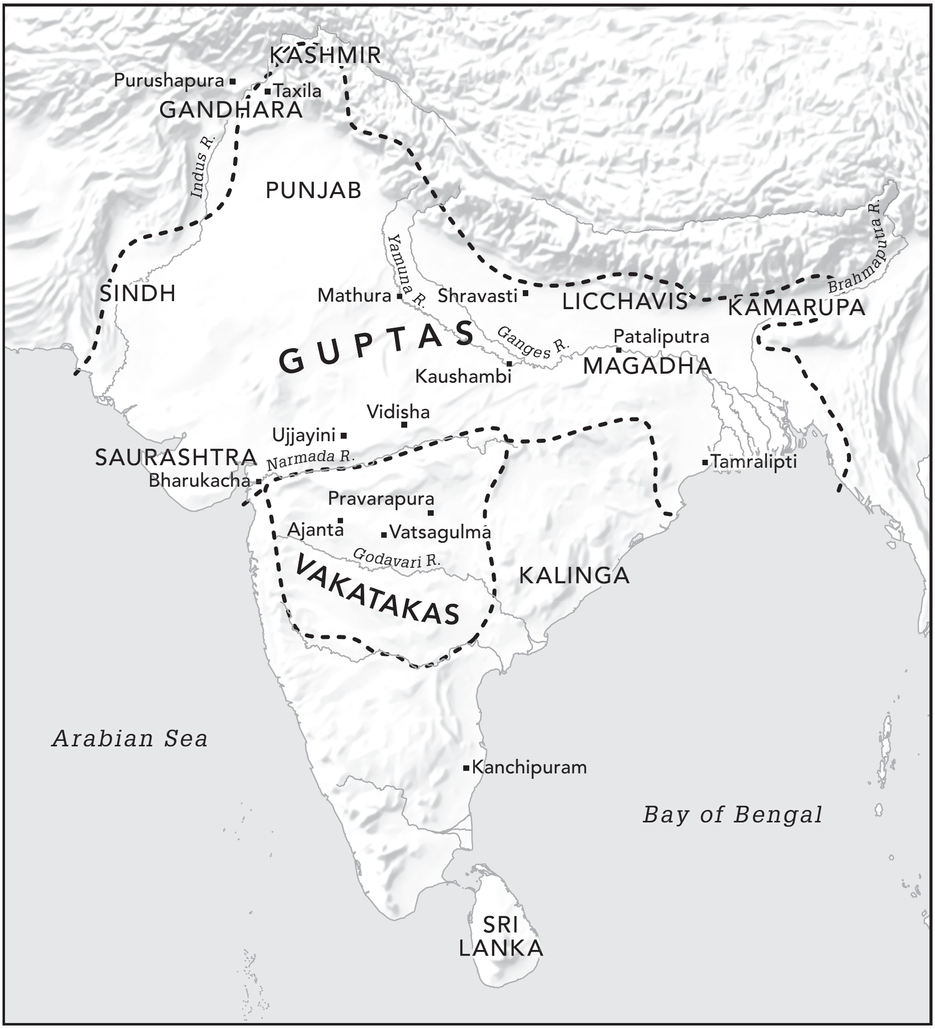
The Age of the Guptas, Vakatakas, and Hunas

The Gupta line of kings began as one of many princely families vying to establish sovereignty as Kushana dominance faded in northern India. In the Magadha region, Chandragupta I declared himself an independent ruler in 320 CE. Taking the former Mauryan capital Pataliputra as his capital, Chandragupta solidified Gupta dominance over the middle Ganges region. He married Kumaradevi, a princess of the Licchavi family, whose royal legacy in the Gangetic region reached back to the time of the Buddha.

Under the long reigns of Chandragupta's son and his grandson, Samudragupta (r. 335–375 CE) and Chandragupta II (r. 375–415 CE), respectively, the Gupta rulers expanded their dominions to include all of the Indo-Gangetic plains. To the west they subjugated the remnants of the Kushana and Shaka polities, Through alliances and diplomatic arrangements, the Gupta kings expanded their imperial authority still farther, throughout most of the subcontinent. In the fourth and fifth centuries CE, the Guptas of Pataliputra established the most powerful Indic imperial formation since the Mauryans (**Map 16**).

The most important Gupta alliance was with the Vakatakas, a ruling dynasty based in the Deccan, modern Maharashtra. The Vakatakas established themselves in the early part of the fourth century, concurrent with the Guptas, under Pravarasena I (r. 270–330 CE), as successors to the Shatavahanas. Ruling from Vatsagulma as his capital, Pravarasena fashioned himself as a Dharma-king, loyal to the Vedic ritual tradition, and claimed to have performed four Horse Sacrifices to solidify his rule. After Pravarasena, the Vakatakas split into several branches. One of those branches formed a close alliance with the Guptas. Chandragupta II had his daughter Prabhavati Gupta married to the Vakataka king Rudrasena II (r. 380–385 CE). When her husband died unexpectedly, Prabhavati exercised rule as queen-regent for twenty years on behalf of her two young sons. The intimate connections between the Guptas and Vakatakas during this period opened up (or reopened) broad trading routes between the Indo-Gangetic plains and southern India, including important port cities like Bharukacha on the Arabian Sea and Tamralipti on the Bay of Bengal. Though the Vakataka founder had patronized Vedic religious culture, a subsequent branch of Vakatakas became enthusiastic patrons of the Buddhist community. During the reign of the final Vakataka king, Harishena (r. 460–477 CE), the great Buddhist caves at Ajanta were excavated and developed as an inspired royal project.

By the middle of the fifth century, a group of Central Asian nomads called the Hunas established themselves in Bactria and began to threaten Gupta hegemony



MAP 16. India in the Gupta Era

in the northwestern parts of India. Like the Kushanas and Shakas before them (and the Indo-Aryans long before), the Alchon Hunas were ambitious nomadic horsemen who saw opportunity in the wealthy lands of South Asia. Gupta inscriptions classified them as *mlecchas*, outsiders, and Gupta rulers fought to confine Huna rule to the northwest borders of the subcontinent. But by the end of the fifth century, the Huna chieftain Toramana (r. 500–520 CE) had moved into the Gangetic regions. He extended Huna rule from the Kabul Valley into

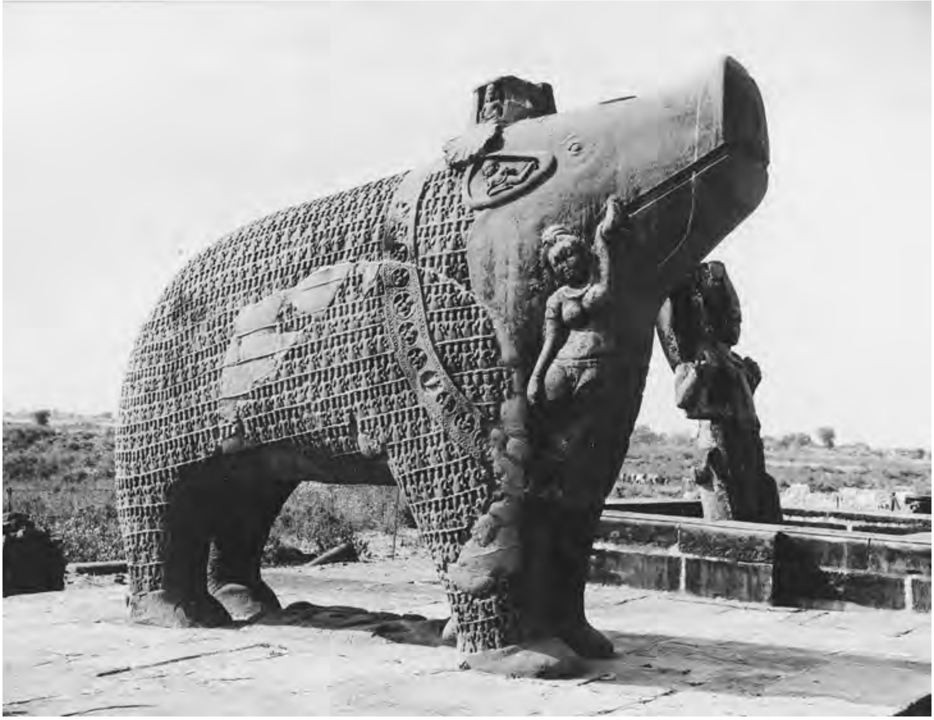


FIGURE 40. Four-footed Vishnu Varaha, Eran, Madhya Pradesh, ca. 500 CE. Photo courtesy of the Center for Art and Archaeology of the American Institute of Indian Studies.

Gujarat and the Malwa region of western India. Toramana and his son Mihirakula (r. 520–535 CE) adopted many of the royal practices of the subcontinent, including inscriptions and coins that took on the same regal titles that the Guptas had used. At Eran, along the Betwa River north of Vidisha, a large imperial-scale image of Vishnu Varaha was erected in the first year of Toramana's rule in the region (**Fig. 40**). This four-footed Varaha was significantly different from the Gupta version at nearby Udayagiri, but its message was similar. The Huna rulers, too, could make a claim to be saving the world.[4]

Huna rule in central India appears to have been short-lived, though it continued in the northwest. Their military campaigns, however, significantly weakened the Gupta and Vakataka dynasties. In the early sixth century, many new local and regional powers once again vied to establish their power. Evidently, many of the Huna chieftains settled down in western India, where their descendants formed some of the Rajput clans of medieval times. This is a common pattern in Indian history. So-called mlecchas, or outsiders, periodically establish themselves as military chieftains and then as legitimate kings.

During their decades of imperial dominance, the Gupta and Vakataka rulers created an era of relative peace, prosperity, and widespread support for religious cultures throughout northern India. When the Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Faxian arrived in Mathura and traveled east along the Yamuna and Ganges rivers, he remarked on the social landscape he encountered:

> The people were well-off and happy; they were not placed under household registration or official restrictions. Those who tilled the king's land were asked only to pay land rent and were free to quit or stay as they pleased. The kings ruled without recourse to capital punishment . . . All the people in this country refrained from slaughtering living creatures, drinking intoxicants, and eating onion and garlic.[5]

No doubt the Chinese traveler had in mind the bureaucratized administrative order of his own country when he observed the more relaxed mode of governance in India. But Faxian also added one major flaw to this portrait of Indic social harmony—the Chandalas or outcastes,

> . . . who were considered "evil men" and were segregated from the others. Whenever they entered a town or a marketplace, they would strike a piece of wood to identify themselves, so that other people might know [they were coming] and avoid encountering them. In this country, no pigs and fowl were raised and no creatures were sold [at market]. There were no butchers or wine sellers in the markets . . . Meat was sold only by caṇḍāla fishermen and hunters.[6]

Chandalas were outside the pale of normal social intercourse. They were "untouchables" because their touch was considered to be polluting. Perhaps these groups were former forest-people—hunter-gatherer and fishing tribes like the Nishadas—who had been marginalized by the expansion of the urban and agrarian economy and Indo-Aryan culture. For Faxian, this extreme form of social hierarchy qualified his otherwise laudatory vision of India. We will explore his account of the Buddhist landscape he observed in India later in this chapter.

During the Gupta Era, elites in the capitals and urban centers consolidated a courtly culture of affluent refinement. Inscriptional *prashastis* praising the rulers proclaimed their virtues in all aims of life, setting out a pattern for the courtly good life. Within the court settings, Sanskrit erudition became a highly prized accomplishment, and Sanskrit drama and poetry flourished. Kalidasa, widely acknowledged as the greatest of all Sanskrit poets, lived as a court poet during the reign of Chandragupta II.

Kings and elites also actively patronized religious groups. To support the disciplinary communities of Smarta Brahmins, they gave land grants known as *brahmadeyas* ("given to Brahmins") that allowed them to continue their Veda-based recitations and rites. These were often recorded in permanent form on plates of copper. Likewise the monastic communities of the Shramanas, especially the Buddhist Sangha, received strong support, as Faxian's account indicates.

The most striking evidence of religious activities during the Gupta Era, however, is the proliferation of new images and shrines created across northern India and the Deccan during the period. The new emphasis on visual religion, taking shape in Kushana times, grew stronger among the Shramana communities of the Jains and Buddhists and equally among the theistic groups centered on deities like Vishnu, Shiva, and goddesses. Image makers explored new themes and iconographic types. Within Buddhism, the Mahayana emphasis on salvific Bodhisattvas such as Avalokiteshvara and Maitreya greatly expanded the Buddhist repertoire of imagery. For Bhagavatas, sculptors created innovative ways to portray Vishnu and his manifest forms, such as the towering boar incarnation at Udayagiri.

The sculptures of the Gupta Era reflected the courtly ethos of the period. Whether depicting a meditating Jina, the teaching Buddha, a Buddhist Bodhisattva, or Vishnu, artisans sought a style that combined abundance and elegance, affluence and refinement (**Figs. 41, 42, 43, and 44**). Art historians have often identified this as an Indian "classical style." As A. K. Coomaraswamy put it in his classic survey of 1927, *History of Indian and Indonesian Art*, Gupta art achieves a balance that is "at once serene and energetic, spiritual and voluptuous."[7] However, the use of the term "classical" here may also bring with it inappropriate and unfortunate implications. It often suggests, for instance, a "golden age" of culture, after which there comes inevitably a decline in inspiration and quality. From the perspective of religious history, Gupta arts fall in between the earlier innovations of visual orientation of the Kushana Era and the more dramatic developments of temple arts that come to fruition in the two centuries after the Gupta Era. We will look at the expansive post-Gupta period in the next chapters.

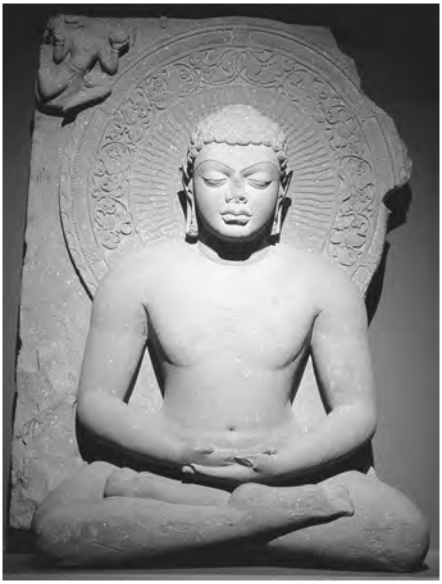


FIGURE 41. Digambara Jina, Kankali Tila, Mathura, 5th century CE. Lucknow State Museum, Uttar Pradesh. ACSAA Slide Collection. Image: Regents of the University of Michigan, Department of the History of Art, Visual Resources Collection.

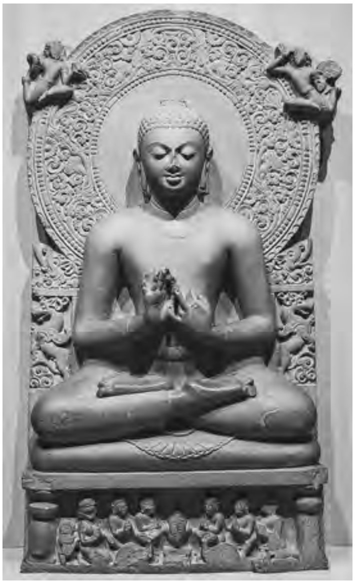


FIGURE 42. Buddha Shakyamuni Teaching, Sarnath, 5th century CE. Archaeological Museum Sarnath, Bihar.

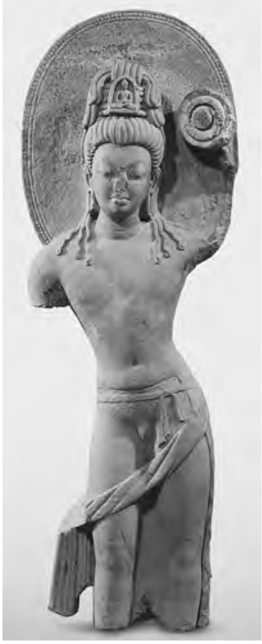


FIGURE 43. Avalokiteshvara, Bodhisattva of Compassion, Sarnath, Uttar Pradesh, 5th century CE. Philadelphia Museum of Art: Stella Kramrisch Collection, 1994 (1994-148-1). Photo courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

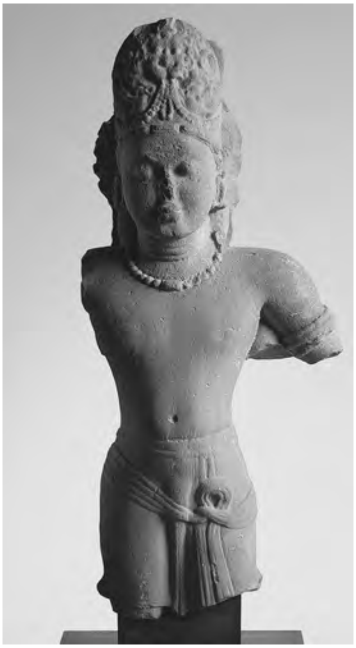


FIGURE 44. Vishnu, Central India, late 5th century CE. Cleveland Museum of Art, purchase from J. H. Wade Fund (1976.75). Photo courtesy of the Cleveland Museum of Art.

Samudragupta and Royal Self-Fashioning

We can picture the scene. The aged king calls all his male offspring into the royal court. He is about to choose his successor, and several of the sons are hopeful. The king beckons to one, "Come here, son," and embraces him. The court attendants are delighted by the choice, but the king's other sons of equal birth feel dejected and angry. The king gazes at the one he has selected, his eyes trembling with love and heavy with tears. "Now," he commands, "you protect the entire earth." Summons, embrace, loving gaze, and charge—all convey the old king's transfer of his ruling authority to his son, Samudragupta.

So the court official and poet Harishena describes King Chandragupta's selection of Samudragupta as the new Gupta ruler in 335 CE.[8] Soon after his accession to the throne, Samudragupta embarked on a series of expansive military campaigns, reaching from the Ganges as far south as Kanchipuram in the Tamil region. At the completion of these conquests, Samudragupta appropriated one of Ashoka's polished-stone pillars, still standing six centuries after Mauryan times in Kaushambi, and had his own message inscribed alongside that of Ashoka. His erudite minister composed a royal panegyric, a prashasti, in high Sanskrit, to celebrate Samudragupta as a Dharma-king. While implicitly aligning the Guptas as imperial successors to the Mauryans, Harishena's praise poem portrays the Gupta emperor as exemplary in all three aims of worldly life: Artha, Kama, and Dharma.

Artha and the Conquest of the Directions

"With his sharp, shrewd mind," Harishena says of the king, "he put to shame the preceptor of the thirty Vedic gods." The legendary priest of the gods is Brihaspati, and he is also one of the teachers who transmitted Brahman's treatise on Artha, according to Bhishma's account in the *Mahabharata*. In other words, Harishena claims that Samudragupta is a master in the science of statecraft.

One of the fundamental tasks of governance, the *Arthashastra* states, is to obtain what has not been obtained. For a king in early India, this most often begins with efforts to expand the territories under his rule. Charged by his father to protect the entire earth, Samudragupta sets out on a campaign to bring the earth under Gupta sovereignty. Harishena's prashasti provides a detailed account of these conquests. It is a *digvijaya*, a "conquest of the directions," in which an ambitious ruler expands his dominion outward from the center in every direction. Samudragupta begins his digvijaya by bringing the areas closest to his capital at

Pataliputra, namely the Aryavarta or central Gangetic plains, under Gupta control. Then he campaigns southward along the east coast as far as Kanchipuram in the Tamil region, west as far as the Indus River, north to the beginnings of the Himalayas in Nepal, and east as far as Kamarupa, modern Assam, along the Brahmaputra River.

It is important to keep in mind that the Gupta empire which Samudragupta and his Gupta successors established was not a unitary state with clear boundaries and homogeneous rule. It did not employ a centralized administrative bureaucracy. Harishena's account of Samudragupta's digvijaya is alert to the different forms of conquest involved in constructing this imperial formation.[9] With opposing rulers in the Gangetic plains, closest to the Gupta center, Samudragupta "exterminates" them and annexes their territories. These lands constitute the core Gupta domain. As for the chieftains of forest tribes (*ataviraja*) occupying the still extensive uncultivated areas of northern India, he reduces them to nominal subjugation. (One imagines the humble hierarchy that the Nishada chieftain Guha observed toward Rama as the ideal model for this accepted submission by the forest people.) On the outskirts of the Gupta core, Samudragupta establishes asymmetrical alliances with existing kingdoms. These lesser allies would acknowledge Gupta overlordship by paying tribute, executing the imperial commands, and attending Gupta court when called upon to offer homage. Farther afield, particularly with kingdoms of the south, Samudragupta practices a policy of "capture and release." Kings are captured and required to acknowledge Gupta rule. They can then be released to continue their own rule, at the distant pleasure of the Gupta king of kings. Finally, at the outer boundaries of Gupta overlordship—including the southern islands of Lanka and the northwest territories still controlled by the Kushanas and Shakas—independent rulers form diplomatic alliances with the Guptas. Even here, the allies are required to observe forms of "self-effacement." They might offer daughters in marriage to the Gupta royal line, and they would adopt the Gupta royal insignia, the Garuda emblem, as part of their own governing iconography.

Within this Gupta Era imperial formation, other rulers throughout India recognized themselves as occupying a place within a hierarchy of kingships.[10] Through his digvijaya, Samudragupta placed himself at the center of this hierarchy. Lesser kings, in their various relations to the Gupta center, enacted their fealty in a variety of concrete and visible ways. The imperial court assembly—such as the one Harishena describes—was an arena within which these relationships of rank could be displayed and seen by all involved. Yet within their own domains, lesser rulers continued to exercise many of the primary duties of rule.

Maintaining a local or regional base of power, a subordinate ruler might well calculate whether or not to declare independence from Gupta overlordship. Imperial overlords like the Gupta rulers, therefore, had to exercise careful surveillance of the subordinated kings in order to enforce their own continuing imperial authority. It was a tenuous form of empire.

Certainly these intricate nuances of interstate relations would require the penetrating intellect of a Brihaspati to administer. As part of his audacious and successful efforts to bring the entire earth under Gupta protection, Samudragupta performed the old Vedic ceremony of world conquest, the Horse Sacrifice. The sacrificial horse is allowed to wander for one year, and all the territories it traverses are claimed as part of the Gupta empire. He had gold coins issued to celebrate the sacrifice. On one side the horse stands facing the sacrificial post, and on the other stands the chief queen Dattadevi, a key participant in the ceremony, wearing a loose robe and jewelry, holding a chowrie fan with her right hand (**Figs. 45 and 46**). The appropriated Ashokan pillar with the added Gupta inscription is another way to proclaim Samudragupta's accomplishment. "This pillar," says Harishena, "is like an arm rising up out of the ground to proclaim the fame of the King of Kings, Shri Samudragupta. Arising from his conquest of the whole world, his fame has spread across the entire surface of the earth, and with a graceful easy movement it rises from this terrestrial world up to the heavenly world of the thirty gods." Written in a public place, on the same stone "arm" where another great long-ago emperor had proclaimed his own ideas of Dharma, Harishena's prashasti embodies and broadcasts the rising fame of the new Gupta emperor.

Kama and the Aesthetics of Courtly Life

One of Samudragupta's royal epithets is Parakrama ("bold attacker"), and Harishena emphasizes the king's personal engagement in his military campaigns. Samudragupta bears the signs of this on his body, which the minister-poet portrays as beautifying adornments. His body "is very lovely, covered with a multitude of beauty marks, which are the hundreds of scars left by axes, arrows, spikes, spears, darts, swords, iron clubs, javelins, barbed arrows, long-span arrows, and many other weapons." Fierce and courageous on the landscape of battle, however, Samudragupta is a man of refinement in the contrasting landscape of the peaceful royal court.

By the Gupta period, Indian royal courts had become miniature societies that placed great emphasis on matters of refinement, aesthetics, and love.[11] This courtly

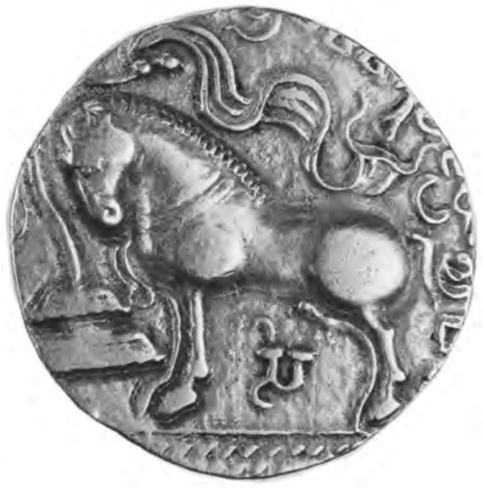


FIGURE 45. Gold Dinara of Samudragupta, Horse-sacrifice type, Pataliputra, 335–370 CE. ANS 1967.154.9. Image courtesy of the American Numismatic Society.

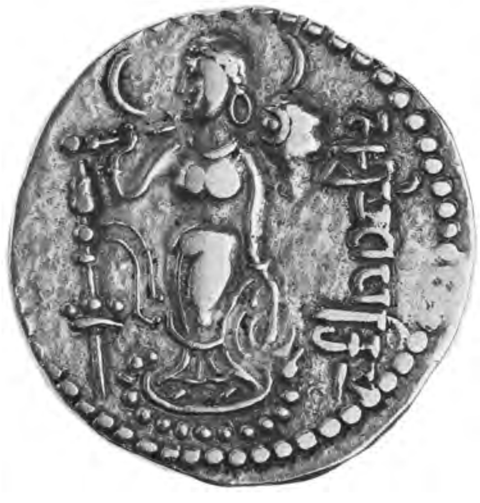


FIGURE 46. Gold Dinara of Samudragupta, obverse side, Queen Dattadevi, Pataliputra, 335–370 CE. Photo courtesy of the American Numismatic Society.

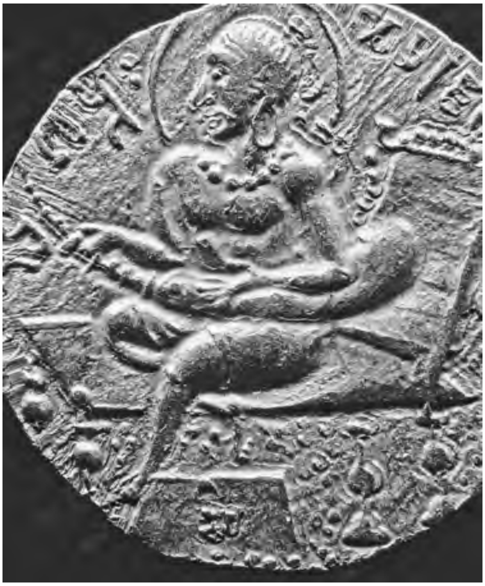


FIGURE 47. Gold Dinara of Samudragupta, King with Vina, Pataliputra, 335–370 CE. ACSAA Slide Collection, set 139. Image: Regents of the University of Michigan, Department of the History of Art, Visual Resources Collection.

ethos would persist for many centuries. Royal elites observed complex protocols of conduct and pursued artistic pursuits, and they actively supported expert practitioners in the arts of poetry, drama, and music. In the Sanskrit dramas created and performed in courtly settings, the elites could see their own ideals of comportment and virtue reflected back to them in the legendary heroes and heroines. The king was expected to set the model for these court practices.

In his praise poem, Harishena points to Samudragupta's own expertise in two of the fine arts, music and poetry. First, the panegyric claims, Samudragupta has outshone even the great legendary musicians Tumburu and Narada through the grace of his musical performances. (Tumburu is a Gandharva, or celestial musician, and the roving Siddha Narada is said to be the inventor of the vina.) The king reinforced this claim by issuing a gold coin that depicts him seated on a couch, playing a vina that sits in his lap (**Fig. 47**). On the inverse side sits the goddess of prosperity Lakshmi, who holds in her left hand a cornucopia.

In the Sanskrit cosmopolitan court, the king was expected to be an active patron and connoisseur of Sanskrit literary composition. Here, too, according to Harishena's inscriptional praise-poem, Samudragupta is a poet in his own right. Indeed, he is given the title "king of poets" on account of his many works of Sanskrit poetry, which serve as a model for the learned.

Dharma and Support of the Righteous

A central duty of the king, according to the *Arthashastra*, is economic redistribution. Once he has gained and grown the wealth of his kingdom through taxes, tolls, and conquest, he should distribute those resources to worthy recipients. These begin with those most in need of aid. The king should seek a well-ordered and prosperous domain in which poverty and misery are no longer present, like the Rama-rajya or other ideal kingdoms extolled in the epic poems. Accordingly, as Harishena points out, Samudragupta engages in the uplift of the miserable, the poor, the forlorn, and the suffering. A kingdom without poverty is most conducive to the flourishing of all its people.

Worthy recipients also include religious specialists. Their labors bear unseen but highly valued fruits for society. Smarta Brahmins, with their work of transmitting the Vedas and performing Vedic sacrifices, are certainly considered worthy. Samudragupta gives away many hundreds of thousands of cows, says Harishena—the cow being the venerable reward given by kings to Brahmins knowledgeable in the Vedas. We can recall, as an ancient example of this pattern, King Janaka's reward of a thousand cows to the erudite Yajnavalkya, as described in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*.

In the Gupta period, we see a new kind of evidence for another long-standing patronage practice: ruling elites making grants of land to Brahmins. These tax-free lands, cultivated by other laborers, would support the Brahmin donee-proprietors while they carried out their own religious duties. Kautilya advocates the practice. The king, he says, should present land grants free from all fines and taxes to Brahmin priests, teachers, and scholars of the Veda. These lands, called *brahmadeyas*, can be passed down across generations.[12] And since they are to be permanent grants, these gifts should be recorded in permanent form. So the Dharmashastra attributed to Yajnavalkya, composed during the Gupta Era, recommends that the donor issue a document on cloth or copper plate, signed with his own seal, name, and ancestry, to form a lasting record of the gift.[13] "For kings," adds Yajnavalkya, "there is no Dharma superior to giving away the wealth acquired through war to worthy Brahmins and always granting security to his subjects" (YDhSh 1.319). Some of the earliest extant copper-plate grants recording donations of brahmadeyas date to the Gupta Era.[14] In these grant records, Brahmins receive the brahmadeyas for specific Veda-related purposes, such as regular performance of the Five Great Sacrifices or daily recitations of a Veda text. Karmic benefits of the Brahmins' pious activities would accrue to the royal donor.

Although Gupta elites supported Smarta Brahmin communities, and Samudragupta performed the old Vedic Horse Sacrifice as part of his conquest of the directions, the Gupta Era was not a "Brahmanical revival" in any simple sense. The Guptas followed the inclusive pattern of Indic Dharma-kings by supporting directly or indirectly the many religious communities existing throughout their dominions. Buddhist communities and their monastic centers flourished across northern India and beyond. Judging from the archeological evidence of images and shrines dedicated in Gupta times, religious patronage was broadly distributed to all the new proponents of visual religion. Jain and Buddhist images proliferated during the Gupta period, as well as new images of the various deities we now classify as Hindu, such as Shiva, Skanda Karttikeya, Vishnu and his incarnations, and goddesses like the Divine Mothers (*matrikas*) as well as Lakshmi and Durga.

As an exemplary Dharma-king, Samudragupta did not only support religious institutions. He might also partake of the divine himself. In his inscriptional prashasti, Harishena suggests this indirectly but unmistakably. As we've seen, Samudragupta is said to surpass semidivine figures like Brihaspati, Tumburu, and Narada in his various capacities. In his splendor and generosity to people, Samudragupta is equal to the four divine guardians of the directions: Kubera, Varuna, Indra, and Yama. Going a step further, Harishena suggests through double entendre that Samudragupta may be the highest deity of all, Vishnu Narayana. He refers to Samudragupta using epithets commonly used for Vishnu, such as Parakrama and Achintya ("incomprehensible one"). As the one who brings prosperity to good people and destruction to the bad, Samudragupta is (or is like) the Purusha, the original Being. His tender heart, says Harishena, can be gained by devotion and honor, much as a devotee should approach a god like Vishnu.

What did Harishena mean by these suggestive phrases? Did Samudragupta's minister-poet intend his audience to take these figures of speech literally? Was he asserting that the Gupta emperor was a god, or even Vishnu himself?

Scholars have debated the question of "divine kingship" in early India for a long time. In the surviving written and archeological evidence, there is no single answer. Different schools of thought, different religious orders, and even different individual authors might take subtly differing positions. But it is important to keep in mind that the dominant religious cultures of early India did not envision a sharp or impermeable break between the domains of the human and the divine. There was frequent communication between the earthly and heavenly, and humans of greater spiritual capacity like the Shramana teachers or yogis could take on divine powers. Gods could be arranged in hierarchies among themselves, with disagreement and conflict over which one enjoyed supreme status. For the Jains and Buddhists, the Vedic gods like Indra and Brahman enacted their subordinate status in the presence of the enlightened humans Mahavira and Buddha Shakyamuni. So the claim that a particular king was a form of a god, or an emanation, or an incarnation of one, or empowered by god, was not such an audacious assertion as it might appear within a monotheistic religious culture.

In this setting, Harishena's metaphoric identification of Samudragupta as, in some unspecified way, participating in Vishnu's being, or as enacting Vishnu's will within the earthly domain of the Guptas, need not be seen as poetic extravagance. Perhaps the Gupta courtier views the king as fulfilling the vision of an empire articulated in the epic *Mahabharata*. Following Bhishma's origin story of kingship, where Vishnu invested some of his own energy in the legendary king Prithu, Harishena wishes those who hear his inscribed poem to know that some of Vishnu's energy has now been invested in the Gupta ruler Samudragupta.

With Samudragupta's son and successor, Chandragupta II, we can see another side of the close relationship between Vishnu and the Gupta imperial formation.

Chandragupta II at Udayagiri: Emperor as Devotee

Let us return to Udayagiri and the large sculpted panel of Vishnu Varaha. We see there two smaller figures, kneeling with hands folded, looking up at the energetic man-boar. Though highly eroded, their postures of devotion are clear. Who are these two? The most likely candidates are Chandragupta II and his minister Virasena Shura.

After some intrafamily battles with his brothers, Chandragupta II succeeded his father Samudragupta in 375 CE. Like his father, he embarked on a digvijaya. This was in part to ensure the continuing fealty of previously subordinated kings within the Gupta hierarchy of rule. He had to reconquer an upstart king claiming independence in the Bengal region, for one. The campaign of conquest also expanded Gupta territories. Chandragupta II crossed the seven rivers of the Indus, claims one inscription, and brought the western regions of Saurashtra, Sindh, and the Punjab under Gupta dominion.[15] This effectively put an end to Kushana and Shaka rule in western India. To reinforce Gupta authority in these territories, Chandragupta II established a second capital at Ujjayini. And the

Gupta elite undertook the transformation of Udayagiri, near Vidisha, into a royal religious site centered on the god Vishnu.

In earlier times, Udayagiri had already become a site for astronomical observations and the calculation of time. Its proximity to the Tropic of Cancer, and the shape of a natural water passage between the two hills, made it a particularly good site to mark out movements of the sun over the course of the year.[16] This gave the place its common name, Udayagiri, or "Sunrise Mountain." But later inscriptions also called it Vishnupadagiri, "Vishnu's Footprint Mountain." Activities during the Gupta Era added this new divine dimension to the hills.

Vaishnava theologians had come to interpret the cycle of the year in terms of Vishnu's pattern of sleeping and waking. Vishnu's sleep cycle applies at different scales, say the Vaishnavas, starting with the most cosmic scale of divine eons. Periodically Vishnu enters into deep sleep. He rests on the cosmic ocean, using the endless snake Ananta as a couch. When it is time for renewed activity, the goddess Lakshmi gently massages Vishnu's feet and stimulates him into action. A lotus emerges from Vishnu's navel, with the creator god Brahman seated atop, and a new round of creation may proceed. At a more human cycle, Vishnu also sleeps for four months of the solar year, the rainy season that lasts from late June into October. The liminal moments of transition—when Vishnu is put to sleep and when he awakens—are naturally highly charged times of the year, and they are marked by important Vaishnava rituals.

Artisans at Udayagiri pioneered a new sculptural form representing Vishnu's cosmic sleep. In an excavated niche near the top of the water passage, a large four-armed figure of Vishnu lies fully prone, atop the snake Ananta, whose coils form round cushions for the god. This iconic form is known as Vishnu Anantashayana, "Vishnu with Ananta as his Couch" (**Fig. 48**). On the wall behind and above sleeping Vishnu is a series of smaller figures. Most prominent is the god Brahman on a lotus. Other figures are more tentatively identified: the goddess Sleep, Vishnu's mount Garuda, Vishnu's personified weapons, a kneeling figure, and two demons Madhu and Kaitubha who set out to disturb Vishnu's sleep.[17] On the dais in front of Vishnu appears a kneeling figure holding a censer, with a smaller attendant standing behind him (**Fig. 49**).

In another excavated cave, a short distance down the water passage, is a Sanskrit inscription composed by Virasena Shura, a minister of Chandragupta II.[18] Virasena states that he is a resident of Pataliputra, a poet, and knowledgeable in the disciplines of grammar, Artha, logic, and worldly practices. He has come to this place, he says, with his master Chandragupta II, who aims to conquer the entire earth. The cave is excavated by his command. In still another cave shrine

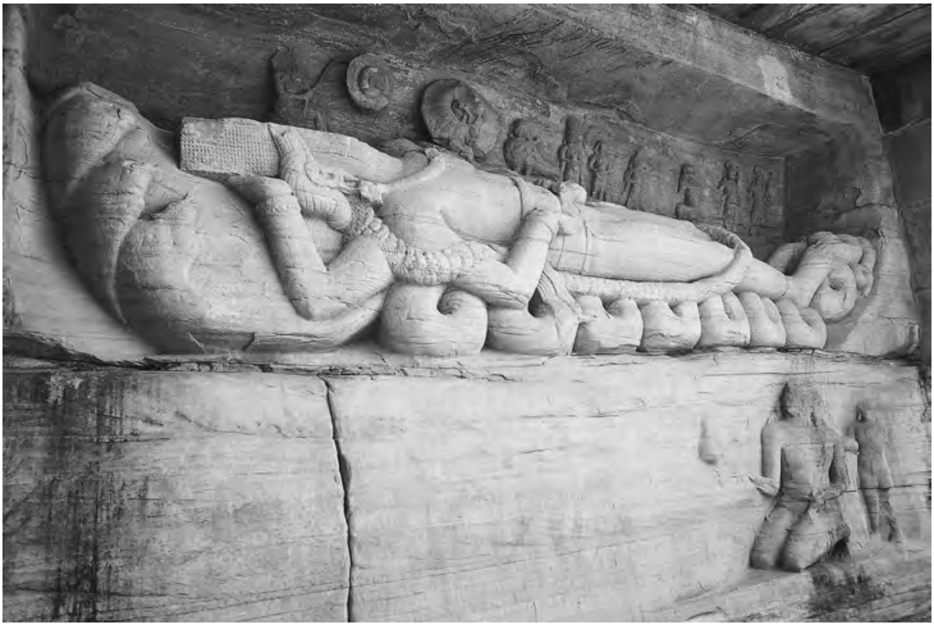


FIGURE 48. Vishnu Anantashayana, Udayagiri, Madhya Pradesh, early 5th century CE. ACSAA Slide Collection, set 31. Image: Regents of the University of Michigan, Department of the History of Art, Visual Resources Collection.

containing a four-armed Vishnu image, an inscription dated to 401 CE records that the shrine has been donated by a local Maharaja, of the Sonakanika dynasty, who acknowledges the overlordship of the emperor Chandragupta II. At the start of the fifth century, the work of turning Udayagiri into an imperial center dedicated to Vishnu is underway. Under Gupta royal supervision, ministers and subordinate kings contribute. As part of the transformation, the "supreme devotee" of Vishnu, Chandragupta II, has himself included in the cosmic activities of Vishnu in a posture of devotion. He is that kneeling figure before the sleeping god.

If one follows the water passage down from the reclining Vishnu Anantashayana cave near the top, one encounters other, more active incarnations of Vishnu. One panel represents him as half-man and half-lion, Narasimha, which he assumed in order to defeat the demon Hiranyakashipu. At the bottom of the water passage is the dominant panel of the man-boar Varaha, rising from the waters to rescue goddess Earth. But other deities are also present along the water passage. The minister Virasena declares in his inscription that he is a

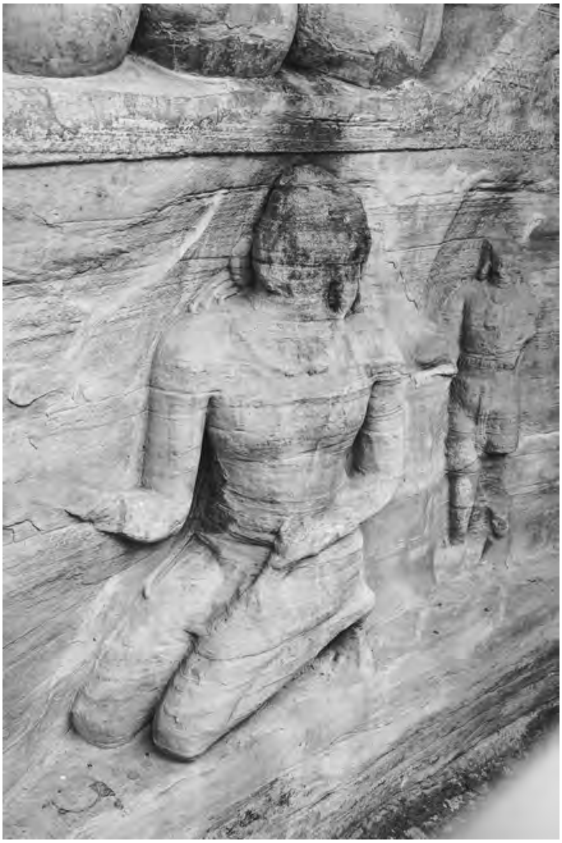


FIGURE 49. Kneeling Figure, Chandragupta II, detail of Vishnu Anantashayana, Udayagiri, Madhya Pradesh, early 5th century CE.

devotee of the god Shiva, and at the center of the adjacent cave is a Shiva Linga with Shiva's face emerging from its shaft (**Fig. 50**). One sees images of the elephant-headed god Ganesha and the war god Skanda. Several goddesses also appear: the river goddesses Ganga and Yamuna, the goddess Durga in her act of defeating the buffalo demon, and a group of eight goddesses known collectively as the "Mothers."

In their religious construction project at Udayagiri, the Gupta elite gave physical form to a Vishnu-centered cosmos, a hill with the "footprint" of Vishnu. (On another hill a few miles away, the Buddhists had created a Buddhist cosmos at Sanchi several centuries earlier and were still adding to it during Gupta times.) Vishnu appears as the highest deity, in forms both dormant and active. But this

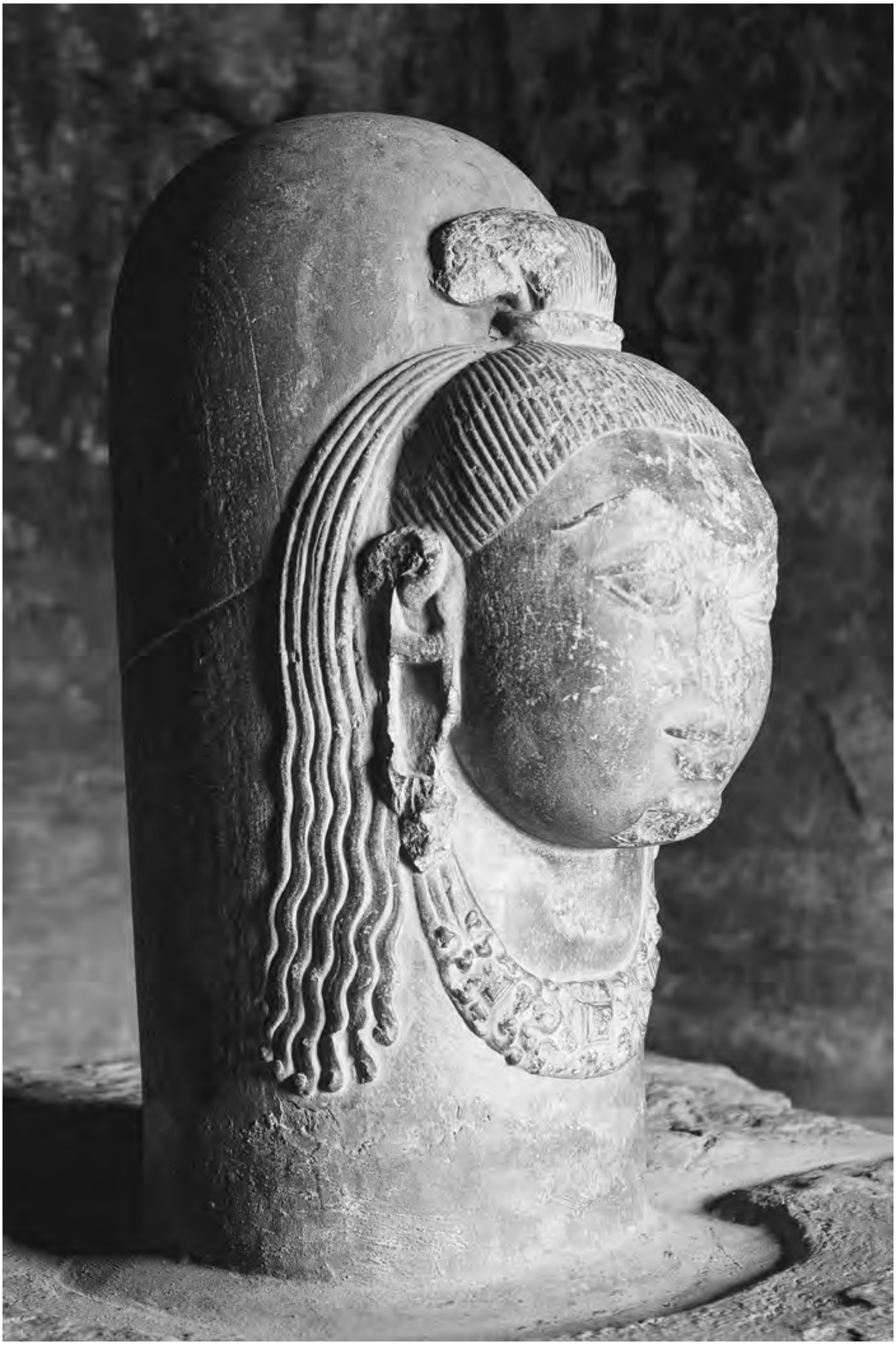


FIGURE 50. Shiva Linga, Udayagiri, Madhya Pradesh, early 5th century,

cosmos also incorporates other deities in subordinate positions; it is a hierarchy of the divine that parallels the hierarchy of kings created by the Guptas in their imperial formation. We can see this Vaishnava site as perhaps the earliest surviving physical articulation of Hindu theism: inclusive, synthesizing, and hierarchical.

Sanskrit and the Literature of Court Life

Within the perfected miniature society of the royal court, the refined language Sanskrit was both medium of communication and marker of status. This elite society saw itself reflected in the Sanskrit literature it composed.

As we've seen, Sanskrit was the Indo-Aryan language of the Vedic tradition. It was maintained in the communities of Smarta Brahmins loyal to the Vedas, and it was perfected grammatically by Panini and a lineage of brilliant linguists. By the time of the Shramana teachers Mahavira and Shakyamuni, spoken or vernacular languages had also developed in different regions of northern India, related to Sanskrit but distinct from it. The early Jains and Buddhists insisted on using vernacular languages, since they associated Sanskrit with its Vedic liturgical usage. Meanwhile, the epic reciters of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* told their tales in Sanskrit, and Valmiki came to be seen as the "first poet" in Sanskrit. During the first two centuries CE, Sanskrit took on new expressive roles in royal settings, as seen in the inscribed prashasti of King Rudradaman and in the poetic telling of the life of the Buddha by Ashvaghosha, a Kushana court poet.

By the Gupta Era, Sanskrit was gaining a central role in royal courts and elite circles. Kings and ministers were praised for their mastery of Sanskrit grammar and for their skill in Sanskrit composition. Since it was not restricted to a particular region, Sanskrit became the lingua franca for diplomacy throughout much of the subcontinent. It became the preferred medium for intellectual life. The Indic disciplines of knowledge employed Sanskrit for their learned treatises in fields such as Kama, Artha, Dharma, astronomy, architecture, mathematics, and in the philosophical schools like Vedanta and Mimamsa.

Sanskrit usage may have been geographically widespread, but it was socially restricted. Bharata's treatise on drama, the *Natyashastra*, directs that plays should reflect this linguistic hierarchy. In drama as in life, gods and kings speak in the perfected language, Sanskrit. Brahmins, learned Buddhists, and sages also use Sanskrit, as do queens and courtesans when the situation demands. Others use forms of "natural" language, Prakrit: Shramanas, mendicants, women (other than queens or courtesans), children, and people who are possessed by spirits or intoxicated. The *Natyashastra* also recognizes seven regional vernaculars and still other lower forms of dialects spoken by low-class characters like cowherds, Chandalas, and forest tribes (NSh 18.25-61). The use of Sanskrit, as it expanded beyond its liturgical borders, became a key marker of social status.

The defining role of Sanskrit in Gupta times is best seen in literature of the period. Kalidasa—widely acknowledged as the greatest poet of refined Sanskrit—lived and wrote during the period, probably during the reign of Chandragupta II. He may have served as an emissary between the Vakataka and Gupta courts. Kalidasa composed two courtly epics, or *mahakavyas*, similar in form to Ashvaghosha's *Buddhacharita*. Kalidasa's poems, however, took up the "Hindu" subjects of Rama's dynastic lineage in the *Raghuvamsha* and the courtship of Shiva and Parvati in the *Kumarasambhava*. He wrote the "cloud messenger" poem *Meghaduta* that conveyed his topophilia for the northern Indian landscape. And he composed three Sanskrit dramas (*natakas*) that reflect and explore the ethos of courtly life in the Gupta Era.

Classical Sanskrit drama came into its own during the Gupta Era. In addition to Kalidasa's compositions, Shudraka's *Mricchakathika* ("Little Clay Cart") and Vishakhadatta's political drama, the *Mudrarakshasa* ("Minister's Signet Ring") both date to this period. Alongside these plays came the first treatise devoted to the discipline of dramaturgy, the *Natyashastra* attributed to Bharata. Practice and theory developed together. As Barbara Stoler Miller observes of the *Natyashastra*, "The formal and thematic complexity of the plays [of Kalidasa] accords well with principles codified in the earliest Indian work on dramatic theory."[19]

Bharata's Treatise on Drama

According to Bharata, the god Brahman created drama (*natya*) at the request of the other gods, as a "fifth Veda."[20] The other Vedas, the gods complained, excluded social groups like the Shudras. Drama should be accessible to all. It should be broad in its representation of life. As a total art form it should include all the arts as subsidiary parts: it should encompass religious ceremonial, poetry, acting, music, singing, and dance.

In his learned treatise on drama, Bharata's *Natyashastra* is broad and comprehensive in the topics it discusses. He describes the construction of the stage and its consecration as a protected sacred space. He classifies the types of plays and the different categories of dramatic plots. The treatise sets out the primary types of characters who should appear in plays of different types. Bharata discusses the verbal features of drama: the languages that various characters may speak, the tones of voice they should use, and the meters for the verses they sing. The text sets out the musical instruments, the types of songs, and the musical rhythms. It describes the qualities needed to make good actors. Bharata explains how actors should convey emotions, how they should walk, and how they should dance. He describes the language of gestures they should employ. He delves into the fine points of costumes and ornaments. The text explains how to tell if a production has been successful. The *Natyashastra* also sets out an aesthetic theory of drama. It argues that the representation of emotional states within a drama can evoke related but distinct aesthetic emotions within a properly receptive audience. This aesthetics of representation and response is at the center of the development of classical Indian drama, and many other Indic art forms.

Bharata begins the *Natyashastra* with an origin story linking drama to the never-ending conflicts of gods and demons. He explains that he organized the first dramatic performance at the request of the god Brahman.[21] The play is to be presented as part of Indra's flag festival, a celebration of Indra's previous victory over the demons. Bharata's play, accordingly, mirrors the event. It features all sorts of fighting and ends with the gods defeating the demons. The gods in the audience are very pleased by the reenactment, and they give generous presents to the playwright and actors. But the demons are not so enthralled. They stand up and rush the stage, yelling, "We don't like this drama! Take it away!" (NSh 1.65) In their rage, the demons use magical powers to paralyze the speech, movement, and memory of the performers. The play comes to a complete standstill. Indra sees what the demons have done, and now it is his turn to be furious. He picks up his flagpole and thrashes the demons with it. Once again the gods are pleased with the outcome, and they praise Indra's flagpole all over again.

Bharata, however, is troubled. The reenactment of the gods' victory he has staged has proven to be divisive. It has provoked exactly the same kind of violent conflict it represented. He realizes that the demons will continue to resent the play and will try again to obstruct the drama. Bharata goes to Brahman for help.

Brahman's first suggestion is to create a special set-apart place for the performance, a "drama-house" (*natya-veshman*). He calls on the divine architect Vishvakarman, who constructs a stage with all the proper features. Then Brahman assigns all the gods to protect the various parts of the drama and its stage: Agni safeguards the stage-floor, the four directional guardians cover the four corners of the stage, Indra defends the male protagonist, Sarasvati the female protagonist, and so on. Divine protection is a good start, but Brahman believes it would also be wise to pacify the demons. He approaches Virupaksha, the chieftain of the demon posse, and asks why they want to destroy the drama.

"This Drama-Veda you have created at the request of the gods," Virupaksha replies, "celebrates the gods and humiliates us demons. Since you, Brahman, created us too, you should not have done this" (NSh 1.103-104). Gods and demons are part of the same worldly creation. If drama simply depicts one group beating another, Virupaksha asks, doesn't it just aggravate the conflict it portrays? In a broader sense, what is the difference between everyday life, with all its attendant conflicts, and the representation of life inside the drama-house?

In reply, Brahman urges Virupaksha not to be angry, and he explains his conception of drama. It is meant to be all-inclusive. "I have created this Drama-Veda," he says, "to illustrate the actions and emotions, both good and bad ones, of the gods and of you demons. But not only ours—drama represents the emotions of beings in all three worlds" (NSh 1.106-107). It should imitate life in all its variety: Dharma, Artha, Kama, play, work, humor, fighting, and death. And it will grant benefits to people according to their needs and desires. To those committed to Dharma, it reinforces Dharma. To those who seek Kama, it fulfills their desires. To those difficult to subdue, it engenders restraint. It calms down those who are drunk and has many other salutary results. "By depicting the actions of high, middle, and low people, drama gives good advice, satisfaction, amusement, pleasure, and many other benefits" (NSh 1.113). There is nothing in the world that cannot be represented within drama.

Brahman stresses two important points here. First, drama as he conceives it depicts all life, in all its variety. Second, drama is not that life itself, but an imitation or representation of it. Drama takes shape in a set-apart, quasi-sacred drama-house, where actors perform that representation for an audience.

The distinction between action (*karman*) and imitation (*anukarman*) is the basis for the aesthetic theory Bharata sets forth later in the *Natyashastra*. Drama presents imitations of actions and emotional states (*bhava*). According to Bharata's psychological classification, there are eight fundamental or "stable" emotional states: pleasure, humor, sorrow, anger, energetic engagement, fear, disgust, and wonder. The task of playwright, director, and performers is to portray these emotions in a powerful, concentrated, and harmonious manner to a receptive audience. What is experienced by the audience is related to the *bhava* represented within the play, but also distinct from it. Bharata calls this the *rasa*, or aesthetic emotion.

The word *rasa* denotes juice, like the sweet liquid extracted from pressed sugarcane, and it also means taste, like the sweet flavor of sugarcane juice when one sips it. Indic treatises on cooking classify six basic flavors and sixty-three subvarieties of flavor. Bharata uses this core meaning to explain his adapted usage.

A cook mixes together different vegetables, herbs, and spices and cooks them to create a dish whose resulting taste is different from any of the individual ingredients that went into the dish. So, too, in a drama. The *rasa* results from a carefully orchestrated combination of constituents—poetry, music, dance, stagecraft, story, and the enactment of emotion—when experienced by a sensitive viewer. Each of Bharata's fundamental states has a corresponding aesthetic emotion, related to but distinct from the emotion itself. This difference between *bhava* and *rasa* explains why we can view a dramatic representation of horror and feel an aesthetic emotion that is related to it but nevertheless pleasurable. It may even be possible for Virupaksha and the demons to view a play depicting the heroism of Indra and to experience aesthetic pleasure rather than anger and humiliation.

Kalidasa and the Drama of Shakuntala

The *Natyashastra* recommends that plays in the *nataka*, or "heroic romance," genre adopt a well-known story for representation in drama form. In his best-known work, Kalidasa takes his plot from the romance of Dushyanta and Shakuntala, earlier told in the *Mahabharata*. This is a story of great importance in the epic, since the son born of their union, Bharata, is the founding ancestor of the Kuru dynasty, from which both Kauravas and Pandavas descend. Kalidasa's dramatic rendering, while following the main outlines of the story plot, introduces significant changes in mood and character. These differences reflect the newer values of the Gupta court, where Kalidasa's primary audience was located.

One change is a matter of presentation. The Sanskrit epics, we've seen, were recited orally for broad audiences. But Kalidasa's play, as historian Romila Thapar points out, "was intended for performance, not for recitation, and was performed at the court or at a court festival for a small, discerning and sophisticated audience."[22] The *Mahabharata* explores Dharma and its difficulties. Social and political hierarchies are out of kilter in the world of the *Mahabharata*. Its flawed characters try to adhere to the Dharma of their Kshatriya class and to restore order in a highly disordered world. Kalidasa's plays convey a more orderly world, whose rulers observe a courtly ethos. In this perfected Sanskritic world, the principal characters speak and act with propriety, generosity, and virtue. They follow the codes of conduct appropriate to their identities within a stable social hierarchy. Performed for audiences at court, Kalidasa's plays would reflect their own refined courtly ideals back to the small discerning circle of royal viewers.

Early in the *Mahabharata*, Vaishampayana tells Janamejaya the story of Dushyanta and Shakuntala to explain the origins of the Kuru dynasty of Kshatriyas, which is Janamejaya's own lineage.[23] It begins when Dushyanta, ruler of Hastinapura, rides out with a great entourage on a hunting party and arrives at the ashram of the Brahmin sage Kanva Kashyapa. He decides to visit the ascetic and enters the hermitage alone. Kanva's ashram is a place of great natural beauty and peace, and it is filled with the sounds of Brahmin ascetics reciting the Vedas. There the king encounters Shakuntala. The young woman shows appropriate honor to the visiting king and tells him that her father Kanva has gone out gathering fruit. Dushyanta is astonished by Shakuntala's beauty, but he is also confused. How is it that a celibate ascetic like Kanva can have a daughter? Shakuntala explains her background forthrightly: she is the daughter of a powerful Kshatriya ascetic, Vishvamitra, who was once seduced by the beautiful Apsaras Menaka, sent by Indra to disrupt Vishvamitra's austerities. After giving birth to a daughter, Menaka abandoned her child and returned to Indra's heavenly world. The infant was first protected from predators by birds (hence her name "Shakuntala") and then found by Kanva, who adopted her as his daughter.

Learning her parentage, Dushyanta is encouraged. Assured that she is daughter of a Kshatriya father, he immediately proposes that she be his wife. He offers to give her precious gifts and even his entire kingdom. He suggests a wedding ceremony of the Gandharva mode—immediate consensual sex—and explains to the innocent Shakuntala that this is lawful for members of the Kshatriya class. She negotiates. Assuming that the king has other wives back at Hastinapura, she insists that the son of their union be made king to succeed Dushyanta on the throne. He quickly agrees, and they make love. Dushyanta then returns to his city and promises to send an escort soon to bring her to the capital. Kanva returns to the ashram, accepts the news of Shakuntala's Gandharva marriage to the king, and predicts that a great son will be born to them. Sure enough, Shakuntala gives birth to a boy, who shows precocious strength and valor. By the age of six the child is capturing and taming the wild lions, tigers, boars, buffalos, and elephants in the forests around the ashram. And sure enough, absentee father Dushyanta fails to send any escort for Shakuntala and her son.

Exasperated by the king's failure. Kanva finally sends Shakuntala to join her husband Dushyanta in Hastinapura. There she demands that the king make good on his promise and appoint their son as *yuvaraja*, "young king" or heir apparent. Dushyanta claims that he does not remember her. Shakuntala becomes furious. Her eyes turn red and she glares at the king with a gaze that threatens to set him ablaze. Like other formidable Kshatriya females in the epic, Shakuntala berates her husband ferociously for his neglect. He is failing to do his duty toward his own son. Even ants manage to carry their eggs without breaking them, she charges, but this supposedly Dharma-knowing king will not even accept his son. Dushyanta replies angrily: women are liars, Shakuntala's mother Menaka was a slut, and her father Vishvamitra was a lecher. "Your birth is very low, and you look like a whore to me," he says. "Everything you've said, ascetic woman, is a mystery to me. I don't know you. You can go wherever you want" (MBh 1.68.79-80). Undeterred, Shakuntala lectures the king on the value of truth: "There is no Dharma higher than truth (*satya*). Nothing is above truth. And there's nothing on earth that cuts more sharply than a lie" (MBh 1.69.24). She leaves in a rage.

Things look bad for the founding of the Kuru lineage. But at that very moment, an unembodied voice speaks from the sky. It commands Dushyanta not to reject Shakuntala and to accept their son, who will be known by the name Bharata. Now Dushyanta is delighted, and he explains to his ministers that he had known all along that the boy was his son. If he had simply taken Shakuntala's word for it, the people might have been suspicious. The word of the "divine messenger" has cleared things up. Now he kisses his son on the head and forgives Shakuntala for her angry words. (He does not, however, apologize for his own apparent forgetfulness or for the humiliating charges he had thrown at Shakuntala.) Shakuntala is honored as queen. Bharata becomes a glorious king and the founder of the lineage whose story is told in the *Mahabharata*.

Adapting this well-known episode from the epic, Kalidasa expands its simple plot of desire, love, separation, and final reunion into a seven-act drama. To the two protagonists, he adds new characters, both in the ashram and in the capital. He incorporates complications and side-plots. But the two most important changes transforming the epic narrative into courtly drama involve character and mood. In Kalidasa's treatment, Dushyanta and Shakuntala become courtly ideals of proper male and female conduct. And Kalidasa introduces interludes within the plot, extended moments of intensified emotion in which characters are given space to express their feelings in poetry and song. Both these dramatic transformations may be seen in the opening scene.

As in the *Mahabharata*, so too in Kalidasa's play, the king comes into Kanva's forest ashram alone, sees Shakuntala, and is immediately struck by her natural beauty. This time, however, Shakuntala is not alone. She has two friends. When Dushyanta emerges from his hiding place and politely asks about her, the two friends speak up on behalf of Shakuntala. They explain Shakuntala's background as daughter of the Kshatriya sage and the Apsaras, and they tell the king of Kanva's intention to marry her to a suitable husband. Shakuntala and Dushyanta both depart from the scene without having spoken directly to one another. Both then speak sotto voce of their love for one another. In Kalidasa's rendering of the lovers' first meeting, both principal characters are much less direct than in the epic version. The king may be smitten, but he acts with circumspection and polite consideration. Shakuntala is rendered bashful. She is voiceless when Dushyanta is present and requires her friends to speak for her.

This initial encounter of mutual observation and love at first sight—but without direct conversation, negotiation, or consummation—opens up a space for Kalidasa to dramatize the mood of rising courtly love between Shakuntala and Dushyanta. In the *Natyashastra*, Bharata terms these "junctures" or "joints" (*sandhi*) in the structure of the plot. The king speaks to his companion of Shakuntala's beauty and his own feeling of love. Shakuntala's friends observe their companion showing all the signs of love. Both suffer from "love sickness," a malady that involves sleeplessness, mental preoccupation, and bodily sensations of feverish burning. The king describes his own state, speaking to Kama, the personified god of desire:

> Arrows of flowers and cool moon rays
> are both deadly for men like me—
> the moon shoots fire through icy rays
> and you hurl thunderbolts of flowers.[24]

Even the moon's soft cooling rays are no match for the fever he feels. Walking around the ashram, he then sees Shakuntala in a similar state.

> Her breasts are smeared with lotus balm,
> her lotus-fiber bracelet hangs limp,
> her beautiful body glows in pain—
> love burns young women like summer heat,
> but its guilt makes them more charming.[25]

Like the king observing Shakuntala's charming state of love fever, the audience is able to savor the intensified emotions felt by the characters within the play. They may be deeply painful to the characters within the drama, but the sophisticated audience can taste them as aesthetic pleasure.

In the *Mahabharata*, both principal characters act in ways that would be seen as inappropriate in the world of Kalidasa and the Gupta court. Shakuntala is too forthright in placing demands on the king, and then gives vent to rage against him, in a public setting, when he claims to have forgotten her. In the ethos of the Sanskrit court, female conduct should be restrained and demure. Kalidasa therefore uses other characters to speak for Shakuntala. First, her two female friends converse with the king. Later, when Kanva sends Shakuntala to Hastinapura, he sends along an escort of young male ashram students. When Dushyanta fails to recognize Shakuntala or to remember their affair, it is one of the male students who vehemently accuses the king, acting as Shakuntala's anger-translator.

Dushyanta's greatest flaw, in the *Mahabharata* version, lies in his failure to make good on his promise to bring Shakuntala to live with him. Male Kshatriya sexual adventures and reliance on the Gandharva form of marriage may have been customary in older Kshatriya culture, but it is considered less acceptable in the new courtly ethos. To redeem Dushyanta's actions, Kalidasa introduces a subplot involving a sage's curse, a signet ring, and a fish. In the play, the irascible sage Durvasas visits Kanva's ashram at the time Shakuntala is in her state of infatuated distraction. She fails to receive the guest properly. Enraged, Durvasas curses her: the lover who has made her forget her duties to the sage will in turn forget her. One of Shakuntala's friends intervenes to soften the curse. Before he left the ashram, Dushyanta gave Shakuntala a ring engraved with his name. Durvasas now allows that when Dushyanta sees the ring he will recover his memory. Thus Dushyanta is not responsible for his failure to remember; a sage's curse did it.

Kalidasa adds another playful twist. At court Shakuntala offers to show the ring that will prove the king's affair. But when she touches the finger where she had worn it, the ring is not there. She lost it while bathing. At this point she and her companions are sent away in disgrace. Meanwhile, a fisherman has caught a giant carp in the Ganges, and when he cuts it open, he finds a royal signet ring. When he tries to sell it, he is arrested and brought to the capital for sentencing. Reflecting Gupta Era class hierarchy, Kalidasa portrays the poor fisherman as a smelly buffoon for the amusement of his courtly audience. But when the king is shown the ring, memory of Shakuntala comes flooding back. He is filled with remorse for having rejected her claims.

In the orderly world of Sanskrit drama, complications like this are only temporary. Order is restored, virtue is rewarded, and lovers are reunited. Kalidasa's drama celebrates the values of the sophisticated upper-class court within a hierarchical society. And his audience, seeing their world portrayed in its emotional depth, can find aesthetic pleasure and insight in this dramatic mirror. As Barbara Stoler Miller puts it, "the goal of a Sanskrit drama is to reestablish emotional harmony in the microcosm of the audience by exploring the deeper relations that bind apparent conflicts of existence."[26]

A Digvijaya in Poetry

In the *Raghuvamsha*, Kalidasa tells the story of Rama's lineage in poetic form. He traces the family line from the Sun to Manu, through the generations to Rama, son of Dasharatha, then to his son and successor Kusha, and on to several further kings in the dynasty. A key moment in this genealogical narrative is the reign of Raghu, Rama's great-grandfather. In Kalidasa's poem, Raghu is the king who carries out a digvijaya that establishes the family as imperial rulers. Composing in the court setting, Kalidasa echoes the contemporary conquests of Samudragupta and Chandragupta II in those of Rama's legendary ancestor. His cultivated audience would certainly have understood the analogy. They would no doubt have savored the implicit connection of Gupta rulers with the lineage of an incarnation of Vishnu. Raghu's poetic digvijaya reflects the conquest of the directions back to the Gupta audience in an idealized form.

As soon as Raghu is consecrated on the throne, he establishes a flourishing and peaceful dominion. When autumn comes, Raghu is instigated to take up his expedition of conquest. In the Vaishnava calendar, Vishnu awakens from his monsoon sleep when the rains end and autumn begins. And on a practical level, the roads become dry enough for marching armies once the monsoon lets up. Raghu leaves his capital and frontier forts well-guarded, and then he ventures out with a sixfold army. He follows a circumambulatory direction: first to the east as far as the ocean, then south along the eastern coast all the way to the Kaveri River in Tamilnadu, west across the peninsula and then into the northwest regions, and finally northward into the Himalayas. Raghu's digvijaya follows the same order as that of Samudragupta, as outlined in Harishena's prashasti, but the boundaries of Raghu's fictive digvijaya exceed those of the Gupta king. In his western campaign, says Kalidasa, Raghu defeated both the Persians and the Yavana Greeks.

Kalidasa is alert to the forms of conquest by which Raghu establishes a hierarchy of kings. With the Vanga kings of the east, he uproots them and then reinstates them, and they in turn must bow at his feet and offer him tribute. In Kalinga, along the east coast, Raghu acts as a "Dharma-conqueror" (*dharmavijayin*). "As a Dharma-conqueror, King Raghu captured and then released King Mahendra, and took his treasure (*shri*) but not his land" (RVa 4.43). When he reaches the deep south, ruled by the Pandyas, no fighting is needed. Intimidated by the effulgence of Raghu's glowing prowess, they present him with the finest pearls from the mouth of the Tamraparni River. But in other places, there is fierce fighting. The Yavanas with their cavalry put up a stiff battle, and after Raghu's victory there, says Kalidasa, his soldiers removed their battle fatigue with wine.

After completing this digvijaya Raghu returns to his capital and performs a ceremony.

> When he had conquered all the directions, the victor returned home, scattering the dust stirred up by his chariot onto the heads of the defeated kings,

> now bereft of their royal umbrellas. He offered the Vishvajit ("all-conquering") sacrifice, and gave away everything he had gained as the ritual honorarium—for as with clouds, so with good people, the purpose of acquisition is to give it away. (RVa 4.85-86)

Raghu is making good on the tasks of the king: obtaining what has not been obtained and redistributing what has been obtained to worthy recipients. The kings who have been defeated take their place within Raghu's hierarchy of kingship. They are allowed to return to their own kingdoms, though now without their royal umbrellas of independent sovereignty.

In Kalidasa's courtly rendering, military conquest is aestheticized. Raghu does engage in some hard-fought battles, Warriors do lose their heads. Yet in contrast to the extended blood-soaked accounts of violent warfare in the Sanskrit epics, Kalidasa's *mahakavya* version mollifies the terror. The dust raised by his army's marching becomes sandalwood powder for the hair of women along the way. The Gupta campaigns that left Samudragupta with a body full of weapon scars made possible the affluent courtly setting in which Kalidasa wrote and recited his *Raghuvamsha*. In his idealized account of Raghu, Kalidasa reflects a kinder, gentler digvijaya back to his refined audience.

Buddhist Landscapes in Gupta India and Beyond

Kings and their courts enjoy a privileged position. They are able to transmit their own voices and visions for posterity. They can put them into permanent material form, and they have their written works passed on in manuscript form. In the Gupta Era, religious cultures were active not just in the imperial centers, but throughout South Asia. Disciplinary communities flourished, shrines proliferated, and theologies circulated widely in oral form. The remnants of these cultures from the fourth and fifth centuries CE, in archeological and textual forms, are partial, but nevertheless rich and varied.

By Gupta times Buddhism had become established well beyond northern India, both to the north and south of the Gangetic homeland. Numerous monks had made their way northward from South Asia through Central Asia to China, carrying with them relics, images, and memorized Buddhist texts. Large numbers of these teachings had been translated into Chinese. At this time Chinese Buddhists considered India the original source of their fundamental doctrine and the source also of the most advanced new Buddhist teachings. China remained a "frontier land" in Buddhist terms, so they looked to India for instruction. The most esteemed of all translators, Kumarajiva (343–413 CE), exemplifies this process of cultural transmission during the Gupta period.[27]

Kumarajiva was born in the city of Kucha, a trade center along the northern trade routes in Central Asia. His father was a Brahmin immigrant from India, and his mother a member of the Kuchean royal family. When Kumarajiva was seven, his mother renounced her place in society to become a Buddhist nun, and Kumarajiva went along with her to become a novice. When he was nine, the two of them traveled to Kashmir, and the young novice had the opportunity to study with an Indian master, Bandhudatta. From Kashmir they journeyed to Kashgar, another important Central Asian city-state. Here the pupil continued his course of Buddhist studies and also studied the Vedas and related Indic disciplines of grammar, logic, medicine, and metaphysics. In Kashgar, Kumarajiva met Suryasoma, a master of the newer Mahayana trends, and he became a confirmed advocate of these teachings. Returning finally to Kucha, Kumarajiva received his full ordination in the royal palace at age twenty and continued to study Buddhist texts with a master from northern India.

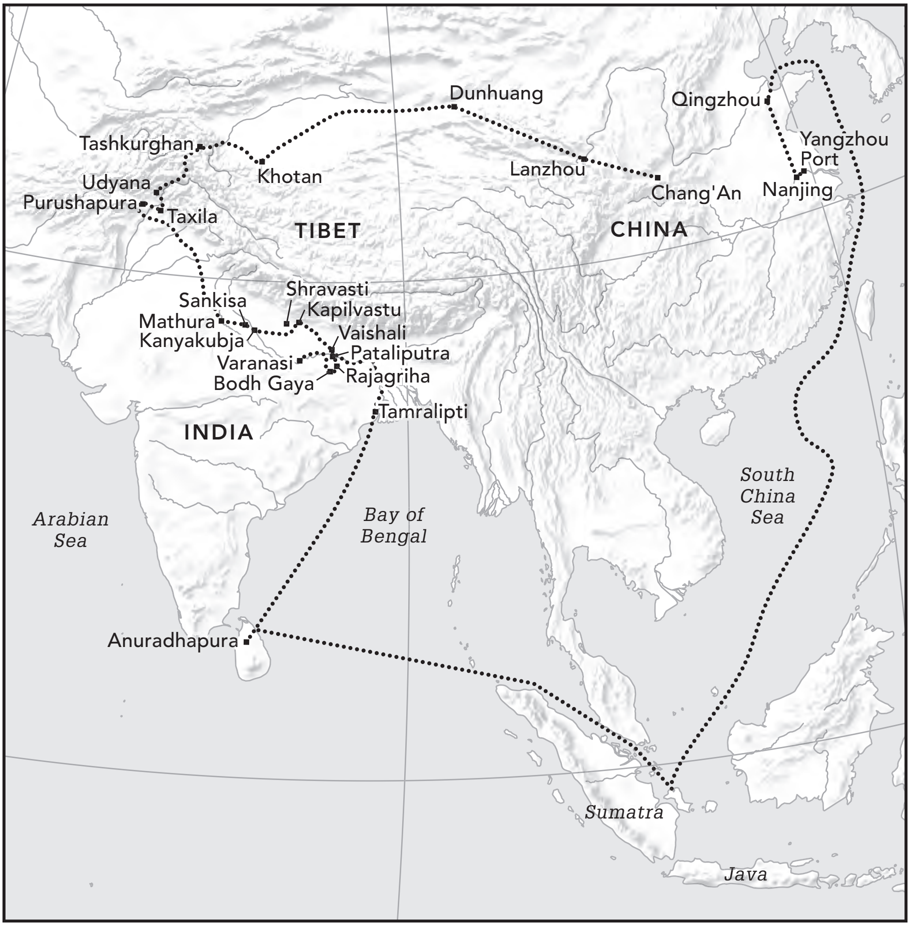
By the year 379, Kumarajiva had come to be recognized as an accomplished and erudite Buddhist scholar. The Chinese ruler Fu Chien tried to bring Kumarajiva to the capital at Chang'an (modern Xi'an), but the monk was captured by General Lu Kuang, who had been sent to bring the Kucha region under Chinese rule. Lu Kuang was evidently hostile to Buddhism, and he kept Kumarajiva under house arrest for seventeen years. Finally in 401, the Chinese emperor Yao Hsing, who had succeeded Fu Chien, sent an army to defeat Lu Kuang and had Kumarajiva brought to the capital with all due honor.

In Chang'an the emperor presented Kumarajiva with a garden retreat and gave him the necessary support to set up a new translation workshop. Kumarajiva was probably the first major Buddhist translator to be equally fluent in both the original Buddhist languages of India such as Sanskrit and the target language of Chinese. The now-famous monk recruited assistants and set to work. It is said that a thousand monks participated in the daily sessions, and that the ruler Yao Hsing also sometimes took part. Working from 402 to this death in 413, Kumarajiva and his team produced thirty-five important works of translation. His special interest was the Mahayana philosophical teachings of Madhyamika, and his efforts led to the formation of a new school of Chinese Mahayana, known as San-lun, the "School of Three Treatises."

While the Indian master Kumarajiva had come to China, the Chinese monk Faxian made his own plans to travel to India. Residing in Chang'an, Faxian had become dissatisfied with the codebooks of Buddhist discipline (the *Vinaya*) then available in China. With four companions, he resolved to undertake a lengthy and risky pilgrimage from the Chinese capital to the original heartland of Buddhism, to study and collect Buddhist works and bring them back to China. They set out in 399 CE, and fifteen years later Faxian returned alone to China. Over time, hundreds of Chinese monks would make similar journeys. One eleventh-century survey documented 183 Chinese monks who had traveled to India and returned.[28] Faxian was the first of these Buddhist pilgrims to record an account of his travels. His description, *Fo-kuo-chi* ("A Record of Buddhist Kingdoms"), provides a fascinating portrait of Buddhist religious cultures in South Asia during Gupta times.

Faxian describes a Buddhist landscape that stretches from China through Central Asian trade-route kingdoms, across northern India from the Indus River to the mouth of the Ganges, and south to Sri Lanka (**Map 17**). Throughout this landscape are Sangha communities of monks and nuns living in monastic establishments that each number in hundreds and even thousands of residents. Faxian distinguishes those that are oriented to the more traditional schools, which he calls the "lesser vehicle," and those adhering to the newer Mahayana.[29] In some cases, he notes, monasteries include both. The landscape is also imbued with the lingering presence of the Buddha Shakyamuni himself, in the form of his relics. These include bodily remains, like the Buddha's clipped hair, fingernails, teeth, and skull bone, and they also include objects used by the Buddha, such as his robe, his alms bowl, his pewter staff, and his stone spittoon. Other marks left behind by the Buddha are his footprints. In one place, Faxian notes, the Buddha left behind his shadow. "Viewed from a distance of about ten paces, it looked just like the Buddha's true form with golden features issuing brilliant light. But the nearer one went to it, the less distinct it became. It looked like a dim shade."[30] Stupas have been erected for these relics, and Faxian describes the honoring rites performed at the monuments. At Hidda in northwest India, the Buddha's skull bone relic is brought out daily from its repository and placed on a bejeweled pedestal atop a lofty platform. Drums are beaten, conches blown, and cymbals clapped. The local king comes to make offerings of flowers and incense, and then places the skull bone for a moment on top of his head, to indicate his subservience. Officers of the court and city merchants then do the same. Only then can the king conduct the business of governance and the tradesmen attend to their affairs.

Images are another key feature of the Buddhist landscape. Though Faxian does not mention them as frequently as he does relics and stupas, the ones he does describe are remarkable. In northwest India he sees a massive icon of the future



MAP 17. Faxian's Travels in the Fifth Century CE

Buddha Maitreya, eighty cubits tall. On fast days, he observes, the image emits an effulgent light. In Shravasti, the famous sandalwood image of the Buddha Shakyamuni, alleged to have been made at the order of King Prasenajit during the Buddha's visit to heaven, still resides in the Jetavana monastery, after miraculously surviving a devastating fire. In Sri Lanka there is a shrine that houses a Buddha image made of green jade, twenty cubits tall. In Khotan and then again in Pataliputra, Faxian observes processions of images. Portable icons of the Buddha are mounted on large four-wheeled carts that look like great moving shrines and are paraded through the city streets. Faxian's accounts of these Buddhist ceremonies are the earliest written evidence of a ritual practice that would become increasingly elaborate and widespread among many religious cultures in medieval South Asia.

Faxian spends the greatest amount of his stay in the Magadha region, where the Buddha Shakyamuni had lived and taught. The Chinese pilgrim visits all the sites associated with the noteworthy events in the Buddha's biography. For three years he stays in the great monasteries of Pataliputra. Shramanas and students come from throughout South Asia and beyond to study at these centers of Buddhist learning. Faxian conspicuously calls Pataliputra the city where Ashoka ruled, but he says nothing about the Gupta emperors who currently take Pataliputra as their capital. Gupta rule seems to be a benign but invisible presence in Faxian's account. It preserves a political order in which Buddhist institutions and society in general are flourishing, but the Gupta rulers do not take an active role in the Buddhist religious culture. In regions far from the Gupta imperial center—in Khotan, Gandhara, and Sri Lanka—local kings engage more directly in Buddhist ceremonies. In Sri Lanka, the king (identified as Mahanama, r. 410–432 CE) endows a new monastery in Anuradhapura and participates fully in the grand annual festival celebrating the Buddha tooth-relic.

During his three years in Pataliputra, Faxian gets down to work on his primary mission, to collect books of Vinaya. However, he is struck by the lack of written copies to transcribe. It seems that, even here in the Buddhist center of learning, oral transmission is the preferred method of maintaining and teaching core texts. Faxian spends his time learning Sanskrit, so he can write out the Vinaya works from oral recitations. Leaving Pataliputra, Faxian travels down the Ganges to Tamralipti, a port city on the Bay of Bengal with twenty-two monasteries. During two years there he writes out more Buddhist texts and draws pictures of the images he sees. From there he sails to Sri Lanka, where he spends another two years transcribing still more Buddhist works.

Along the way Faxian has lost his traveling companions. One dies on a particularly cold mountain pass, and another falls ill in Purushapura. In Pataliputra his friend Daoching is so impressed with the dignified and observant Indian Sangha, and its contrast with the imperfect Buddhist community of his own country, that he makes a vow: "He swore not to be reborn in a far-off country until he achieved Buddhahood."[31] He determines to remain in India. But Faxian begins to experience homesickness. In Sri Lanka he watches a Chinese merchant offer a white silk fan to the jade Buddha, and his eyes fill with tears. From Lanka he books passage on a large merchant ship heading east. A typhoon knocks the boat off course. The merchants throw all the bulky goods overboard, fearing that the extra weight might cause the boat to sink. Faxian throws his personal pitcher and bowl into the waters, but he refuses to part with the precious texts and images he has assiduously collected. He prays to the compassionate Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara (Kuan-yin). Providentially the boat comes to shore after ninety days, in a country he identifies as Java Island. After a five-month stay there, Faxian finds another ship bound for the Chinese coast. It also encounters terrible distress at sea. Finally it makes shore on the Chinese coast far to the north of its intended destination. After fourteen years abroad, Faxian launches into the next phase of his project, to translate into Chinese the many Indic works he has transcribed and transported back to China with him.

13

The Puranas: Varieties of Hindu Theism

LITERARY SANSKRIT MAY HAVE reached its peak of refinement in elite courtly settings like those of the Gupta rulers, but as a language of religious thought and practice it expanded far beyond court precincts into new settings. No longer tied solely to Vedic liturgical usage or the culture of Smarta Brahmins, Sanskrit was adapted by many schools of Buddhists for their new religious texts. Jains adopted Sanskrit at minimum for purposes of religious debate, as in the work of Umasvati. Sanskrit became the language of the sciences in the broad sense, in disciplines such as Dharma, Artha, Kama, astronomy, mathematics, medicine, and the training of horses and elephants. The new and growing schools of Hindu theists, such as the Bhagavata votaries of Vishnu or the early Pashupata followers of Shiva, also employed Sanskrit. This is best seen in the rich genre of religious literature called the Puranas, which proliferated from Gupta times onward.

The Puranas form an enormous corpus of religious literature. There are eighteen "major" Puranas, eighteen "submajor" ones, and countless others of more modest status. The major Puranas alone run to around 400,000 verses, or four times the length of the *Mahabharata*. The name *purana* ("old traditions") highlights the claim of these works to be ancient, and many of them allege a continuity with the Vedas. Undoubtedly some of the contents do reach back to early times, but the earliest completed Puranas, such as the *Vishnu Purana*, probably date to the Gupta Era. Other Puranas continued to be compiled through the early medieval period, and beyond. The *Bhavishya Purana* ("Future Purana," an oxymoron), the most open-ended of the major Puranas, contains sections that date to the fifth century CE, but it also "predicts" late medieval figures like the Mughal emperor Akbar, and even foretells the coming of British rule to India.[1]

The contents of the Puranas are equally vast. They aim to present a comprehensive account of the world in all its most important aspects. According to one oft-cited classification, a Purana should cover these five big topics: primordial creation of the cosmos, cyclical creations and destructions of the worlds, genealogies of the gods and patriarchs, reigns of the Manus during the epochs call *manvantaras*, and the history of the solar and lunar dynasties of kings. This is only one approximation, and these topics in fact comprise a small part of most Puranas. As comprehensive and encyclopedic works, the Puranas delve into multiple subjects and disciplines of knowledge. In addition to cosmological and genealogical matters, many Puranas incorporate lengthy discussions of Dharma, Artha, astronomy, architecture, town planning, sacred geography of pilgrimage sites, yogic practices, and even Sanskrit grammar and poetics. For the history of religious cultures in South Asia, however, the Puranas are most valuable for their presentation of the theologies, mythologies, and ritual practices centered on the primary gods of emerging Hindu theism—Vishnu, Shiva, and the Great Goddess.

Religious historians have often characterized the Puranas as presenting a unitary religious viewpoint: "Puranic Hinduism" or "Brahmanical Religion." But it is more apt to look at each Purana individually, since they often present the distinctive teachings of one or another disciplinary order or theistic school of thought. Each individual Purana generally holds one particular deity to be the Supreme Deity, and each purana applies all the vocabulary of the Absolute to that god or goddess. This divine affiliation is usually signaled by the title of the Purana. The *Vishnu Purana* and the *Bhagavata Purana* both consider Vishnu as the Highest Being, while the *Shiva Purana* and the *Linga Purana* take Shiva as the One. The *Devi Bhagavata Purana* takes the Mahadevi, the Great Goddess, as Supreme. Within the theistic pantheons of these preeminent gods, other deities are subordinated to lesser roles or positions, using various strategies of encompassment and hierarchy.

In this chapter we look at three important early Puranic texts. The *Vishnu Purana*, dating probably to the late Gupta Era, presents the Vishnu-centered theology of the developing Pancharatra ("five nights") school. From the early eighth century, the *Kurma Purana*—despite the title referring to Vishnu's tortoise incarnation—is devoted to the god Shiva, considered the Pashupati ("Lord of All Creatures") and the Mahadeva (the greatest of deities). The *Kurma* belongs to one of the first organized schools of Shaiva devotees, who called themselves the Pashupatas. The *Devi Mahatmya* section of the *Markandeya Purana* is the earliest extant work to argue that the Great Goddess Mahadevi is in fact the Supreme Being, superior to all male gods.

As a genre of composition, the Puranas were not restricted to Hindu theists. The non-theistic Jains also composed their own Puranas—several hundred of them, in Sanskrit, Prakrit, and regional vernaculars. Like the Hindu Puranas, the Jain Puranas aim to present a comprehensive vision of the world and how best to act within it. The Jains do not highlight the doings of gods, but rather the deeds of exemplary humans, the sixty-three "great men," and especially the twenty-four Tirthankaras recognized within the Jain religious community. Within a Jain conception of the world and its fundamental forces, Jain Puranas trace the path followed by each of these ford makers from the clutches of samsara to the attainment of Moksha.

The Hindu Puranas present themselves as dialogues (*samvada*), most often between an authoritative teacher and an eager pupil. In some cases the preceptor is in a position to report directly the earlier discourses of gods, adding a further level of authority to their own instructions. Often these sessions take place in ashram settings, such as the Badarika ashram or the Naimisha forest, far from the city and court. The forest is the privileged location for the communication of transcendental knowledge. And that communication, in the Puranas, takes place through oral exposition, between teacher and student, that we are allowed to overhear in the form of written Puranas.

The *Vishnu Purana* and Vaishnava Devotionalism

At the start of the *Vishnu Purana*, the student Maitreya poses a series of questions to his preceptor, the eminent sage Parashara. Maitreya explains that he has learned to recite the Vedas. He has studied the Vedas, the auxiliary Vedic sciences, the treatises on Dharma, and other bodies of knowledge. Now he wishes to pursue a higher knowledge. How was the world created, and what is its future? What is the fundamental substance of the cosmos? Where do the gods and other living beings come from? Where does the world go at the times of its periodic dissolutions? The preceptor Parashara knows many things. He is master of the Vedas, the auxiliary disciplines, the Dharmashastras, the epic histories, and the Puranas. But for all his wide-ranging knowledge, Parashara's answer to all Maitreya's questions revolve around one thing: Vishnu. "The world is produced out of Vishnu, and it abides in him," Parashara replies succinctly. "Vishnu is the agent of the world's preservation and dissolution. Vishnu is the world" (VP 1.1.35).

In the course of the *Vishnu Purana*, Parashara presents a greatly expanded version of this strong monotheistic position. Vishnu is indeed all-encompassing, and he contains multitudes. On the one hand Vishnu is transcendent, the Absolute. On the other, the immanent Vishnu includes other gods, who are aspects or active emanations of his total being. Vishnu encompasses the multitude of incarnations he takes on in particular settings or situations. We can think of this, in rough terms, as a polytheistic version of monotheism. Parashara teaches Maitreya, and all who hear the *Vishnu Purana*, an early Vaishnava formulation of what I am calling Hindu theism. It builds upon the Vaishnava teaching that the god Brahman explains to Rama in the *Ramayana*, and on the theology that Vaishampayana imparts in the *Harivamsha*. But Parashara's lengthy discourse to his pupil adds important new features to the devotional theology of Vishnu.

The Totality of Vishnu

One dimension of this theology stresses the ultimacy of Vishnu. Parashara draws on the apophatic vocabulary of the Absolute, which reaches back to the Upanishads. Vishnu is the *brahman*, the Purusha, the One, the Imperishable, the unchanging, Self-Existent. Vishnu is exempt from birth and death, free of all impurities, devoid of form, color, or other perceptible qualities. Who could describe such a transcendent Being, asks Parashara.

Yet Vishnu is also inextricably active in the world, in manifold ways. From his earlier Vedic studies Maitreya has learned that the god Brahman is the creator of the world. But now, Parashara explains that Brahman is in fact the divine form that Vishnu takes on for the task of cosmic creation. The god Rudra or Shiva is said to be the agent of destruction when the worlds are reabsorbed into their source. Yet Shiva is also a form assumed by Vishnu for that purpose. So of the three fundamental cosmic activities—creation, preservation, and dissolution—carried out by a trinity of gods—Brahman, Vishnu, and Shiva, respectively—all of them are actually the work of a singular Vishnu, acting through multiple divine forms. Within the formations of Hindu theism presented in the Puranas, this is a common theological strategy. It recognizes multiple deities and allows them a provisional reality, but then it includes or absorbs them within a single god designated as the Supreme Deity.

So, too, with the goddess Lakshmi: she is another side of this larger Vishnu. Maitreya observes that Lakshmi is usually identified as arising when the gods and demons churn the primordial ocean. But Parashara explains to his pupil that this is a limited viewpoint, taking account of only one of her many manifestations. She is the eternal mother of the world, always the beloved of Vishnu. Just as Vishnu is all-pervasive, so is she. Parashara goes on to list many of her aspects, in tandem with Vishnu. When Vishnu takes on incarnations like Rama and Krishna, Lakshmi becomes incarnate as his female consort, Sita and

Rukmini. When Vishnu appears as Shiva, then Lakshmi appears as his spouse Parvati. Vishnu is the lord of riches; Lakshmi is wealth itself. This paired coupling reaches beyond animate beings into all other aspects of reality. If Vishnu is the sun, Lakshmi is the sun's radiance. Vishnu is the ocean, and Lakshmi is the shore. Vishnu is the sacrifice, while Lakshmi is the sacrificial honorarium. After listing many of these pairs separately, Parashara summarizes: "Among gods, animals, humans, and other beings, whatever is considered male is the Lord Vishnu, and whatever is female is Lakshmi. There is nothing other than these two" (VP 1.8.32). In this gendered cosmos, Parashara encourages Maitreya to regard Vishnu and Lakshmi as the primordial and pervasive male and female principles of existence.

During his colloquy Parashara also tells Maitreya about Vishnu's various bodily incarnations. Often these are specific to particular tasks. Vishnu assumes the amphibious form of a boar to rescue Earth from sinking into the ocean. When the ocean needs to be churned by gods and demons, he appears as an enormous tortoise so his shell can be used as a pivot for the churning pole. Parashara tells the story of Krishna Vasudeva, brought up as a human cowherd. Here he follows the main outlines of the *Harivamsha* account, but with many variations of detail. (A later Vaishnava Purana, the *Bhagavata Purana* of the eighth or ninth century CE, retells the Krishna story yet again, in greater detail, and becomes the fullest and most authoritative account for devotees of this incarnation.) Later Purana works, and subsequent Vaishnava tradition generally, advance a standard list of ten incarnations of Vishnu. But Parashara emphasizes a broader and more variegated conception of Vishnu's incarnational capacity. Within the vast cosmic time and space set out in the *Vishnu Purana*, he explains, Vishnu's different incarnations reside in different locations. Distinctive divine forms of Vishnu appear in successive ages and during the four eras, or *yugas*. At the conclusion of our present Kali-yuga, Vishnu will reappear in the incarnational form of Kalki to restore Dharma. For all his incarnational diversity, however, Parashara also insists that Vishnu retains a singular all-encompassing character. "In his total form (*vishvarupa*), Vishnu is everywhere, at all times, the Lord of all. He supports all beings, Maitreya. Vishnu is the Atman of the entire world" (VP 2.2.50-51).

A valuable feature of the Vaishnava theology of incarnations is that it enabled the expanding religious community centered on Vishnu Narayana to subsume multiple figures and their followers into an overarching divine framework. We have seen the examples of Rama and Krishna, who most likely originated historically as local legendary heroes and came to be universalized as primary incarnations of Vishnu. In the *Vishnu Purana*, Parashara claims that the Buddha was also an incarnation of Vishnu, and he tells a story to support this new inclusion. (In later Puranas, the Buddha did figure in the standardized list of ten, though the Buddhists certainly did not accept what they considered a hostile takeover bid.) Parashara's account of the Buddha-avatara is not at all flattering to the Buddha.[2]

At the opening of the episode, the demons led by Hrada have once again defeated the gods, seized the three worlds, and taken over for themselves the sacrificial offerings meant for the gods. Since the demons are carefully following Vedic precepts and observing austerities, the gods are powerless to counterattack. They appeal to Vishnu, who promises to assist them. Using his divine power, he emits a form meant to deceive: Mayamoha. He approaches the demons, appearing as a naked ascetic holding peacock feathers. Here the target seems to be the sky-clad Digambara Jains. Mayamoha offers to teach the demons a secret path to liberation, and he instructs them in a method of skeptical reasoning. The demons are seduced by this new doctrine—which is a bowdlerized version of Jain teachings—and they abandon the Vedas. Next, Mayamoha puts on red robes and gently recommends that the demons give up animal sacrifice. So the demons are gradually led away from Vedic practices and become "heretics" (*pashanda*) as a result of the deceptive teachings of Vishnu in his Mayamoha form. And once the demons have renounced the path of the Vedas, they lose the armor of Dharma. The gods seize their opportunity and defeat the demons. Parashara concludes by explaining to Maitreya that those who adopt those paths taught by Mayamoha are indeed naked, since they have abandoned the religious covering of the Vedas.

Exemplary Acts of Devotion and Vision

Parashara's teachings in the *Vishnu Purana* situate Vishnu as a supporter of the Vedic gods and of the Vedas, as we see in Vishnu's incarnation as the Buddha. However, Parashara's theology places this Supreme Deity far beyond any other Vedic god. The Vedas themselves are acknowledged and subsumed, like the bristles on the much larger body of Vishnu's boar incarnation. Given Vishnu's supremacy, the appropriate response of others is to seek to participate in Vishnu's totality by gaining and praising his full presence. If Vishnu is physically present in an incarnation, then one should recognize that material form as a synecdoche, a partial manifestation of Vishnu's all-encompassing nature. The incarnation is a window into his totality. So when Vishnu in his boar body as Varaha rescues the goddess Earth, she does the right thing. She sings a long hymn of praise proclaiming him as creator, preserver, and destroyer of the cosmos.

When an incarnation is not at hand, however, the devotee may undertake serious efforts to make him present. Parashara tells Maitreya stories of extraordinary vision quests. The ten Prachetasa brothers practice austerities submerged under the ocean for ten thousand years in order to gain a vision of Vishnu and receive the god's favor. The young Kshatriya prince Dhruva, hoping to attain an exalted status, meditates fixedly on the god until Vishnu enters his mind. This poses a great problem. With the weighty deity now inside Dhruva's mind, the Earth is unable to support the burden. Environmental calamities ensue. When Dhruva stands on his left foot, one half of the earth sinks; when he shifts to the other foot the earth's other half falls. Finally the alarmed gods persuade Vishnu to appear outside the determined prince and give him what he wants. Vishnu grants Dhruva the exalted position that he has been seeking. That is why Dhruva, the "firm one," now sits fixedly in heaven as the pole star.

To gain such a vision of Vishnu, one should practice a form of Yoga. Near the end of the *Vishnu Purana*, Parashara relates to Maitreya the teachings of the Kshatriya ruler Keshidhvaja. The only solution to human suffering and ignorance, Keshidhvaja stresses, is Yoga. Self-restraint is the foundation of Yoga, he observes, and he goes on to outline the preliminary methods of restraint: observances, vows, postures, breath control, and withdrawal of the senses. His account follows exactly the order of Patanjali's well-known *Yogasutras*, and there is nothing in Keshidhvaja's description of the first five limbs of Yoga that a non-theistic practitioner of Yoga would not recognize. Only with the sixth limb, concentration of the mind (*dharana*), does Keshidhvaja slip an innovation into Patanjali Yoga. Concentration, he says, involves the mind's apprehension of the visible form of Vishnu. Keshidhvaja then provides detailed instructions on how exactly the yogi should envision Vishnu. The god is dressed in a yellow robe, wears a crown, and has a pleasing expression. Vishnu has either four or eight arms and holds in them implements such as mace, discus, and lotus. In other words, he appears in visualizations much as Gupta Era sculptors were also portraying him in stone. The final two stages of Yoga, meditation and contemplative absorption, follow from the successful visualization of Vishnu.

In Keshidhvaja's teachings the agency of vision appears entirely within the yogic practitioner, who gains Vishnu's presence through interior mental techniques alone. Visualization offers human control over the apprehension of the divine, which elsewhere appears rather unpredictable. And the placement of Keshidhvaja's teachings in the *Vishnu Purana*, as Parashara's answer to Maitreya's final question, suggests that the text itself endorses visualization as a key new practice to the followers of Vishnu. However, earlier episodes, such as the episode of Dhruva, raises important reservations about the technique.

Parashara's emphasis on Vishnu's totalness, and Keshidhvaja's description of yogic visualization practice, pose an ontological question. If Vishnu is truly the all-encompassing Lord, then ultimately He is already within each of us, and we are all in our various ways participants in the cosmos He encompasses. Yet we are still not the same as Vishnu. Are we one with Vishnu, or separate? It is an old debate in Indic theology between monists and dualists. In the *Vishnu Purana*, the story of Prahlada takes up the philosophical issue of difference and nondifference.

Prahlada is a young demon whose father Hiranyakashipu has gained sovereignty over all three worlds. During his Vedic studies (for demons also recognize the value of the Vedas), Prahlada's mind becomes absorbed in Vishnu. When his father one day summons him to court and asks him to recite what he has learned so far, Prahlada extols Vishnu as "the eternal one, the prime cause of all causes" (VP 1.17.15). Seeing this as a slight to his own hard-earned preeminence, Hiranyakashipu becomes enraged and asks the poor teacher how the young boy has learned to praise his foe. The preceptor answers that Prahlada's outburst did not come from anything he had taught him. Prahlada explains to his father that he has learned it from the very source. "Vishnu is the teacher of the entire world, and He dwells in the heart. What else is there to teach, except Him, the Supreme Self?" (VP 1.17.20)

Things go from bad to worse in the demons' father-son relationship. Hiranyakashipu assigns new teachers to reeducate Prahlada away from his subversive ideas, but they fail to clear his mind of its absorption with Vishnu. Hiranyakashipu then tries to kill his son, but the soldiers' weapons do not pierce the boy, the snakes' venom does not harm him, and the tusks of the elephants cannot gore him. The power of Prahlada's devotional attachment to Vishnu seems to render him invulnerable to all types of attack, intellectual, physical, and even ritual. Hiranyakashipu deploys a contingent of Samaveda Brahmins, who create a magical female from their sacrificial fires. When she strikes Prahlada, her trident breaks, and in frustration she turns on the Vedic Brahmins who have invoked her. Finally Hiranyakashipu has the boy tied up with snake-ropes, thrown into the ocean, and buried at the bottom under an immense pile of rocks.

Confined in this way Prahlada meditates and praises Vishnu and comes to believe that he himself is Vishnu. "I am the Highest Self," he meditates, "imperishable and unending" (VP 1.20.2). This realization of nondifference is potent, for as Prahlada becomes one with Vishnu through the force of his meditation, his fetters burst apart, the ocean roils, and the earth trembles. He throws off the rocks and emerges from the water. But when he sees the terrestrial world again, he remembers who he is: "I am Prahlada." With the recognition now of his difference from the deity, Prahlada immediately starts to praise Vishnu. Appropriately, his prayer points to Vishnu's encompassment of seeming opposites: material and subtle, changing and unchanging, manifest and unmanifest, differentiated and undifferentiated, embodied and unembodied, visible and invisible, one and many. Prahlada reflects: Vishnu "is all beings and yet is not all beings." At this precise moment Vishnu appears before Prahlada, dressed in yellow.

This episode seems to pose an interpretive puzzle. Which is correct: Prahlada's belief in watery confinement that he is one with Vishnu? Or his apprehension on dry land that he is Prahlada, distinct from a yellow-garbed Vishnu? Prahlada's own prayers suggest that the audience should regard the seeming contradiction in the text as deliberate and significant. Both positions can and should be simultaneously true of the Highest God. Vishnu is indeed one with all beings, and there Prahlada's monist recognition of fundamental identity finds its basis. However, Vishnu is also something other than all beings, and so Vishnu appears visibly separate from the demon when he recalls his own identity as Prahlada. Prahlada arrives at the theological understanding that later Vaishnavas term "inconceivable difference *and* nondifference" (*achintyabhedabheda*).

Later on, Vishnu in an incarnation as part-man and part-lion, Narasimha, destroys the demon Hiranyakashipu. Prahlada succeeds his father and becomes a pious and virtuous ruler of the cosmos.

The *Kurma Purana* and the Shaiva Pashupatas

In the *Vishnu Purana*, Parashara may portray Shiva as just a subordinate form that Vishnu assumes in order to carry out the task of cosmic destruction. But not all Hindu theists would have accepted this condescending view. Shiva's own followers certainly did not consider their own deity that way. In Puranas devoted to Shiva, their god is just as total in his expansive being as Vishnu is in the *Vishnu Purana*. The *Kurma Purana* was originally a Vaishnava work—hence the identification with the tortoise, one of Vishnu's incarnations at the churning of the ocean—but it was taken over and reworked by an ascetic-oriented school of Shiva worshippers, the Pashupatas. This early Shaiva community took its name from Shiva's identity as the "Lord of All Creatures" (*pashupati*). It was an audacious undertaking: votaries of one group appropriating a text from another god's followers. The Pashupata revisers do grant Vishnu a substantial role in their version, but that god also comes to recognize the supremacy of Shiva. The Pashupatas used this revised Purana to set out many of the principal stories of Shiva's exploits and the proper ways to honor and worship that deity. Scholars estimate that the Pashupata recension of the *Kurma Purana* was completed in the early eighth century CE. There is no extant version of the earlier Vaishnava form of the *Kurma Purana*.

Arising of the Shiva Linga

Worshippers of the god Shiva consider the Shiva Linga to be the foremost icon of veneration. But how did this Shaiva object for worship first come to be established? In the *Kurma Purana*, the god Vishnu tells an origin story to the sage Markandeya. His story begins at the primordial Vaishnava scene, just before the dawn of a new creation.

During the great flood of dissolution, Vishnu relates, he lies atop the cosmic ocean deep in meditative sleep. Suddenly he sees a four-faced figure of immense radiance approaching, shining like ten million suns. He is the god Brahman. In the blink of an eye, Brahman comes up and challenges Vishnu. "Who are you? Where have you come from? What are you doing here? Tell me, Lord, since I am the creator of the worlds, self-born, great-grandfather to all!" (KP 1.25.72) Vishnu immediately responds that he, Vishnu, is the creator of the worlds, and also their destroyer, over and over. As this argument over cosmic priority flares up, the immense shaft of a Linga rises up from the ocean, glowing like the fire at the end of time. "Quick, you go down," Brahman says, "and I'll go up. We have to find its limits" (KP 1.25.76). (In other versions, Vishnu takes on his form of a boar to plunge into the depths, while Brahman flies up as a swan.) They split up, but even after a hundred years of searching they are unable to reach the end of this primordial Linga.

Amazed and fearful, they approach it and acknowledge the supremacy of Shiva with a song of praise.

> Praise to the one who remains through the flood of dissolution and who is himself the cause of dissolution and re-creation; to the tranquil Shiva who is the *brahman* embodied in a Linga.
>
> Praise to the one whose form is a flaming pillar with limbs covered in garlands of flame; to the tranquil Shiva who is the *brahman* embodied in a Linga . . .

> Praise to the Immutable One, the True, the Eternal, the one with spotless energy; to the tranquil Shiva who is the *brahman* embodied in a Linga.
>
> Praise to the wise one who is the end and essence of the Vedas, and whose form is Time; to the tranquil Shiva who is the *brahman* embodied in a Linga.
>
> (KP 1.25.81-82, 86–87)

The two other gods recognize that Shiva, not either of them, is the being fundamentally responsible for the dynamic creations and dissolutions of the manifest world. They identify Shiva with the *brahman*, which they acknowledge is embodied or made manifest in the Linga. They locate the Vedas as a part of Shiva's greater being.

When Vishnu and Brahman praise him in this way, Shiva makes himself visible to them. Previously, he explains, he made the two of them from portions of himself. Now he generously offers them any wish they desire. Brahman and Vishnu eagerly ask to share in Shiva's being. Accordingly, Shiva gives them assignments: they will be the parts of him who carry out the cosmic activities of creation and preservation. Shiva evidently reserves the act of destruction for himself.

Vishnu finishes his account to Markandeya by explaining that, from that time on, the worship of the Shiva Linga has been established in the world. The Linga, he reminds him, is the highest embodiment of the *brahman*. So, Vishnu tells the sage, "You should constantly praise Shiva and meditate on him in your mind. If you do so, you will quickly cross over this ocean of samsara" (KP 1.25.108).

A Song of Lord Shiva

At the center of the *Kurma Purana* is an eighteen-chapter section called the *Ishvara Gita*, the Song of Lord Shiva. Within the Puranas there are numerous Gitas, or "songs," spoken by gods; they form a subgenre of short texts embedded within the Purana master-genre. There is a *Ganesha Gita*, a *Brahma Gita*, a *Devi Gita*, and many more.[3] These Gitas are similar in form to the famous *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna's teachings to Arjuna in the *Mahabharata*, and scholars have often dismissed the Puranic Gitas as inferior imitations of that original. But all the Gitas present distinct teachings and advance competitive claims on behalf of the deities who speak them. Moreover, they often employ sophisticated intertextual strategies to set their arguments forth.

Gitas always involve a dialogue between a god and an audience, usually but not always human. The *Devi Gita* in the *Devi Bhagavata Purana*, for instance, involves the Great Goddess instructing the divine mountain Himalaya. Often the auditors approach the deity in a state of doubt or despair, similar to Arjuna's anguish on the Kurukshetra battlefield. In the *Shiva Gita*, Rama is despondent after his wife Sita has been abducted, and he goes to Shiva, who gives him instructions as well as a special weapon to use against his enemy Ravana. These Gitas always convey authoritative teachings on the fundamental nature of the world and guidance for effective human conduct leading both to worldly benefits and to ultimate liberation. Each divine speaker of a Gita persuades his or her audience that he or she is the Supreme Deity, subsuming or subordinating all other divinities. And often, the theological discourse gives way to visionary transformation. The audience is able to see the true supernal form of the god, much as Arjuna sees Krishna's all-encompassing form in the *Bhagavad Gita*. Imitation may be the sincerest form of flattery, but the formal imitation in the Purana Gitas was never simple flattery of the epic original. Audiences were expected to make comparisons, to observe parallels, and to notice significant differences.

The *Ishvara Gita* relates a conversation between Shiva and a group of twelve sages at the Badarika ashram in the Himalayas.[4] The sages have been subjecting their bodies to harsh austerities, but their minds are still full of doubt and uncertainty. The god Vishnu Narayana abruptly appears to the sages and asks them what's the matter. After suitable praises to the god they address as the Highest Person, the sages pose their questions.

> Though all of us speak of the *brahman*, we are still subject to doubt, and so we come to you, the Highest Person, as our sole refuge, for you know the highest truth. You are the omniscient lord and sage Narayana himself, the ancient and unmanifest Person, for no one but you knows everything. We want to learn it all from you. You can cut away our doubts. What is the cause of this whole world? What is it that eternally transmigrates? What is the soul, and what is liberation? What is the instrumental cause of this fluctuating existence? Who is the Lord who controls transmigration, and who sees everything? What is the highest *brahman*? You should explain all this to us. (KP 2.1.23-27)

This Gita clearly differs from the *Bhagavad Gita* in setting, audience, and initial conundrum. The conversation takes place in a hermitage, not on a battlefield. It involves an audience of sages who have already renounced worldly life, not a Kshatriya warrior threatening to renounce battle. The questions these ascetics ask from the start are much more metaphysical or theological than the ethical dilemma that initially preoccupies Arjuna.

The *Ishvara Gita* immediately introduces still another departure from its formal model. As soon as the sages have outlined their questions to Vishnu, another deity suddenly manifests himself in their midst: Shiva, the Lord Mahadeva. Shiva embraces Vishnu, and like a superior officer arriving to take over command from a subordinate, he turns to Vishnu to learn what it is these sages are asking. The friendly but hierarchical relations of those two Hindu divinities, with Shiva firmly proclaimed the higher, is a central Pashupata theme that threads through the *Kurma Purana*. Glorious as he may be, Vishnu recognizes his limitations in this text, and he asks Shiva to convey divine knowledge to these sages, "for you know your own nature, and no one else knows it" (KP 2.1.41). The sages of Badarika ashram, and likewise the audience of this Purana, are asked to shift their allegiance from Vishnu to Shiva as the very Highest Person.

Shiva begins by cautioning the sages that the liberation-granting knowledge he is about to impart is a deep secret, not known even to the lesser gods, and it should be concealed from others. He then addresses the questions of soul, cosmos, and liberation that the sages have raised. As Krishna does in the *Bhagavad Gita*, Shiva draws upon the ideas of various texts and schools of thought, especially the Upanishads, the Samkhya system, and the Yoga school. He also quotes from Krishna's teaching in the *Bhagavad Gita*. But Shiva is definitely not just reproducing Krishna's argument here. He does not concern himself, for example, with issues of Dharma, with the redefinition of killing, or with the matters of class and family obligations that figure so prominently at the opening of the *Bhagavad Gita*. Those issues are not so relevant to a gathering of ascetics.

Shiva does share a theological agenda with Krishna, though the divine nature he gradually reveals to the listeners is his own, not that of Krishna. Shiva, not Krishna or Vishnu or any other god of the existing Hindu pantheon, is the Supreme Deity. Shiva must therefore attribute to himself the vocabulary of the Absolute. He is the Creator, the Arranger, Time, the One who faces all directions. He pervades all Being, and all Being is in Him. Shiva also stresses his ties with the Veda. He inserts himself as the true recipient of all sacrificial offerings. "The Vedas always hold me to be the Supreme Lord," Shiva explains to the sages, "and the Brahmins worship me as Fire through their various Vedic sacrifices" (KP 2.4.6). Like Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gita*, Shiva here stresses his inclusive regard for devotees of all classes.

> Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas who follow Dharma all honor me, and I grant them the highest place, a state of bliss. But others of the lower classes as well, Shudras and the like, even though they may have behaved badly, if they

> are filled with devotion toward me, they will gain liberation in due time and join with me. (KP 2.4.10-11)

And like Krishna, Shiva does not require complex sacrificial rites, but appreciates the simple actions of devotional worship. "A person who collects leaves, flowers, fruit, and water for worshipping me and presents them to me is certainly my devotee. That person is dear to me" (KP 2.4.14).

A paradox lies at the center of Shiva's divine nature. Although he tells the sages that he is the Supreme Yogin, at repose in the absolute stillness of meditative bliss, he is also the one who sets the cosmos in motion. He is the dynamic Creator and Destroyer. To do this, he dances. And as the sages watch, Shiva begins his dance, displaying his highest divine nature. Unlike Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita*, the sages here enjoy the capacity to witness Shiva's supernal form without needing to receive a "divine eye."

> They saw the god with a thousand heads, a thousand feet, and a thousand arms. His hair was matted, and his crown was the crescent moon. He wore a tiger's hide and held in his large hand a trident, with a staff in the other hand. His three eyes were the Sun, the Moon, and Fire, and the three Vedas. He had fearsome fangs. There he filled the entire Cosmic Egg with his own radiance, as bright as ten million suns. Both inside the Egg and outside the Egg, and surpassing both inside and outside, Shiva emitted a tremendous blaze as if to burn up the entire world. (KP 2.5.8-11)

It is an awesome vision, and while Shiva's dance does display his annihilating power, the sages are not alarmed the way Arjuna is by the grotesque destruction of his battlefield epiphany. With suitable awe, the sages meditate and are able to see the Lord within their inner selves, just as they have seen him externally. The sages of Badarika ashram are better equipped than Arjuna to comprehend their revelation. At this point, Shiva removes his supernal form, and he reappears calmly before the sages, accompanied by Vishnu.

At the sages' request, Shiva continues his teachings. There are many parallels here with Krishna's exposition in the *Bhagavad Gita*, but Shiva shifts the emphasis in one fundamental respect. Although both Krishna and Shiva acknowledge multiple paths to religious attainment, Krishna grants devotion the highest place in the scheme. By contrast, Shiva stresses the benefits of Yoga. Speaking to the group of renouncers, Shiva reviews the eight limbs of Patanjali's *Yogasutras*, but he inserts his own modifying addendum.[5] There are in fact two forms of Yoga, says Shiva: a "Yoga of nonbeing" and a "greater Yoga." Patanjali's formulation of a non-theistic Yoga leading to the cessation of mental activity and the autonomy of the soul may be a useful preliminary practice. But Shiva advises the sages to adopt the greater Yoga, leading to a superior state. At the highest stage of meditation, he tells them, they should identify themselves with the Lord Shiva. This is the "Pashupata Yoga, for the liberation of the souls from its fetters" (KP 2.11.67). After emphasizing that Vishnu should be understood as one with Shiva, the two gods disappear from the conclave of sages.

Devi Mahatmya: One Great Goddess

As female forms of the divine, goddesses appear everywhere in early Indic religious cultures.[6] From the terracotta figurines of "little goddesses" meant for domestic worship to the large-scale earthly deities like the Yakshis and Naginis, goddesses are a significant feature in the religious landscape. Buddhist, Jains, and the early Hindu theist groups all include female divinities among their earliest sculpted imagery. Some goddesses, like Lakshmi and Sarasvati, are claimed by all religious communities. Lakshmi lends her auspicious presence to the sculpted gateways at Buddhist Sanchi, as we have seen, and the earliest identified image of Sarasvati comes from the Jain stupa at Kankali Tila, Mathura, dated to the early second century CE. Goddesses may appear individually, paired up with male consorts, or gather in all-female groups such as the set of goddesses known as the Matrikas ("Mothers").

In many settings, goddesses appear as benign and beneficent. Yakshis, it is said, touch trees with their heels to cause them to flower and bear fruit. As consorts or wives, goddesses are supportive of male agendas. In Vaishnava works like the *Vishnu Purana*, Lakshmi acts as female counterpart to Vishnu and joins him in his many earthly incarnations. Likewise, Parvati always stands by her male god Shiva, and Sarasvati is paired with the creator god Brahman. But we also see goddesses in fiercer form, taking on more independent roles. In sculpture, the little goddesses who wear weapons as hair ornaments are early examples of threatening goddess forms, and the female who breaks the back of the buffalo, first appearing in Kushana Era sculpture, demonstrates the great power of the goddess known as Durga. Goddesses can bring adversity to humans, especially around the vulnerable moments of childbirth and infancy. Early Buddhist texts describe the goddess Hariti (the "seizer"), residing near Rajagriha in the Magadha region, who steals young children and eats them or feeds them to her own sons. (According to the stories, the Buddha converts her into a more benign follower by hiding one of Hariti's sons in his begging bowl, in order that she experience suffering similar to that of her victims.) The Sanskrit epics portray the Matrikas as inauspicious, dangerous beings who consume flesh, drink strong liquor, and lurk threateningly in the childbirth chamber for the first ten days of an infant's life.

Based on studies of modern Indian folklore as well as historical sources, A. K. Ramanujan proposes we classify these as two distinct types of female deities, "Breast Mothers" and "Teeth Mothers."[7] Breast Mothers are married and subordinate to their male consort. Pure and chaste themselves, they are involved in auspicious matters of family and social life, and are benevolently disposed toward humans. Breast mothers are not meat eaters, and devotees honor them with vegetarian offerings. Teeth Mothers, by contrast, are usually unmarried and independent of male control. They are seen as powerful and often dangerous beings who may bring pain and suffering to human families and communities. They are not vegetarian, and they often expect blood sacrifices as part of their offerings. Worship of Teeth Mothers may take the form of propitiation, intended to cool their anger. But properly satiated, Teeth Mothers can bring their powers to bear on behalf of their worshippers.

The Mahadevi as Supreme Deity

One key Purana, the *Devi Mahatmya* ("Greatness of the Goddess," a portion of the *Markandeya Purana*) sets forth a provocative and far-reaching claim.[8] All these many goddesses, it asserts, are actually forms or manifestations of one Great Goddess, Mahadevi. And this Mahadevi—not Vishnu, Shiva, or any other male god—is in fact the one Supreme Deity. It is a new theology for the divine feminine.

The *Devi Mahatmya* is framed as a teaching session involving Medhas, a Brahmin ascetic who lives deep in the forest, and two male auditors who find their way to his ashram. Suratha is a Kshatriya ruler who has been usurped by his own ministers and has taken refuge in the forest. Sumadhi is a wealthy Vaishya merchant, whose greedy wife and sons have confiscated his money and banished him from their home. The two dispossessed wanderers meet one another and take their troubles to Medhas. How is it, they ask, that even though they have been abandoned and humiliated, they continue to feel attachment to what they have lost? The departed king still selfishly craves his kingship, and the merchant continues to feel love for the wife and sons who have so mistreated him. "Even though we can see the flaw in this matter," says the king, "our hearts are still tugged by selfishness. So how is it, holy one, that even intelligent people harbor such delusions?" (DM 1.32-33) Their opening questions are not the dilemmas over Dharma that animate Arjuna at the start of the *Bhagavad Gita*, nor the more theological and metaphysical issues that the ascetics of Badarika ashram pose to Vishnu and Shiva in the *Ishvara Gita*. Rather, the king and merchant are perplexed and troubled by the nature of human attachment and wonder at the egoism and delusions that humans experience.

The teacher Medhas replies that all human delusions of selfishness and worldly attachments result from the power of what he calls Mahamaya ("great illusion"), a force that brings about the continuing existence of the world (*samsara*). It is this force that seizes minds, even those of people who should know better, and casts them into the pit of delusion. And this great power, Medhas continues, is a form of the Great Goddess.

> She emanates the entire world with its animate and inanimate creatures. When pleased, she becomes a giver of favors to humans, for the sake of their liberation. She is the highest eternal wisdom. She is the cause of our bondage to existence, and also the cause of our liberation from it. She is lord over all the gods. (DM 1.42-44)

The king is eager to hear all about this remarkable goddess, and Medhas continues: "She is eternal, and the world is her body. She spreads throughout the world, and yet at the same time she appears in many forms. When she manifests herself to accomplish some divine task, people say she is 'born' in the world, even though she is also eternal" (DM 1.47-48). Here, then, is a new formulation of the Highest Being, in female form. Just as the advocates of Vishnu and Shiva assert of their chosen god, Medhas here claims that the Mahadevi is both singular and manifold, both eternally transcendent and actively present in the world. She is responsible for human bondage, but also the means by which we can gain freedom from our fetters. To explain further the nature of this Great Goddess, Medhas tells his students several stories of her worldly activities.

The Great Goddess as Sleep

Medhas's first account begins with the primordial Vaishnava scene: Vishnu is stretched out on the bed formed by his endless snake enjoying his yogic sleep (*yoga-nidra*). The creator god Brahman is sitting on the lotus in Vishnu's navel. Suddenly two terrifying demons emerge from the wax in Vishnu's ear and threaten to eat Brahman. If they succeed it might forestall creation altogether. Brahman sees them, and with mental concentration he begins to praise—not Vishnu, but the Sleep that was dwelling in Vishnu's eyes. Sleep is a goddess, he recognizes, that is lord over all.

> By you is the cosmos supported,
> and by you the world emanated.
> By you, goddess, it is protected,
> and always, in the end, you consume it.
> At the creation your form is emanation,
> in stable times it is preservation,
> at the world's end your form is destruction—
> You who encompass the world!
> (DM 1.56-57)

Brahman goes on to acknowledge Sleep as the Great Goddess and ends his song of homage with a request. "Quickly," he urges her, "please awaken Vishnu, lord of the world, and once he is awake, have him kill these two big demons" (DM 1.67).

When Brahman celebrates her, the dark Goddess flows out of Vishnu's eyes, mouth, nose, arms, heart, and chest. Once Sleep has freed Vishnu from her power, he is able to wake up and confront the demons. They are brave and powerful, and Vishnu must fight them in hand-to-hand combat for five thousand years. Ultimately Vishnu is victorious. He places their heads on his buttocks and severs them with his discus. The creation of the world can now go forward. And so, Medhas concludes his brief tale, when Brahman praised the Goddess, she appeared in person.

This short story is a subversive new take on the Vaishnava creation narrative. It places both Brahman and Vishnu in a position of dependence on the greater power that the Mahadevi, in her form as Sleep, exercises over Vishnu. In the face of a demonic threat to creation, Brahman must meditate on the Goddess and acknowledge her overarching powers. When he does so, Medhas reminds his two listeners, the Great Goddess appears to Brahman in person. So, too, should the humans who hear this talk, he implies.

Durga Defeats the Buffalo Demon

Medhas next retells the story of the buffalo-slaying Durga. As we've seen, the image of a powerful goddess battling a buffalo had been represented in sculptural form starting in the Kushana Era. But here, the legend takes on a new valence, since Medhas explains that this goddess Durga is another manifestation of the power of Mahadevi.

Once upon a time, he says, the army of the demons has defeated the gods in a hundred-year war, and the demon leader Mahisha ("buffalo") has become lord of heaven. The distraught gods go to Vishnu and Shiva and complain that their enemies have expelled them from heaven. Hearing this, Vishnu and Shiva become furious. A great blaze of energy bursts forth from their angry faces and from all the other gods as well. All this blazing fury unites into a single mass of energy, like a mountain aflame, and it turns into a woman. The gods are thrilled by the Goddess who has emerged from their collected powers. Each god gives her a weapon: Shiva gives her a trident, Vishnu a discus, Indra a thunderbolt, and Himalaya gives her a lion to serve as her mount. When the Goddess roars and laughs, the earth quakes and all the mountains shake. Mahisha rushes out to see what has caused all the cosmic commotion. The battle of demons and gods, Mahisha and the Goddess, is on.

Medhas describes the battle in detail. Finally, after the Goddess has destroyed all Mahisha's armies and leading warriors, Mahisha confronts her directly. The Goddess throws a noose around the head of the buffalo demon. Mahisha changes into a lion. The Goddess cuts off the lion's head, and Mahisha appears as a man with sword and shield. She chops him up. He turns into an elephant, and she severs the elephant's trunk. Finally Mahisha returns to his buffalo form. With his buffalo horns he flings mountains at her, and she pulverizes them with her arrows. The Goddess drinks more of her wine, roars out a challenge, and leaps onto the demon's back. She presses down with her foot and stabs him with her spear. Then she cuts off his head and ends the life of the buffalo demon.

With their enemy destroyed, the gods bow down to the Great Goddess and honor her with a long song of praise.

> We bow with devotion to the Goddess Ambika, whose *shakti* (energetic power) pervades the whole world. She is the very form of all the powers of the entire host of the gods. She should be honored by all the gods and sages. May she grant us good fortune. Not even the lords Vishnu, Brahman, or Shiva are able to describe her unequaled splendor and strength. May Chandika make up her mind to protect the entire world and to destroy the fear of misfortune. (DM 4.3-4)

The gods go on to praise her in her many names and manifestations. She contains all the hymns of the Vedas. She is the independent Durga, Lakshmi who lives united within Vishnu's heart, and Parvati who stands beside Shiva. In the one goddess form that has defeated the buffalo demon Mahisha, the gods are able to recognize the full dimensions of this Great Goddess.

After Medhas describes these and other actions of the Goddess, the students Suratha and Sumadhi are convinced. They move to an island on the river to practice their devotions without interruption. They fashion an icon of the Goddess out of clay and honor her with flowers, incense, fire offerings, and water libations. They give her food offerings that have been sprinkled with blood from their own bodies. After they have practiced self-control and honored her for three years, the Goddess is pleased and she becomes visible to them. She grants them whatever they most desire. The king chooses worldly benefits: to have his enemies destroyed and to recover his kingship. The Vaishya wishes instead for the liberating knowledge that will free him from notions of "I" and "mine." After she has granted these boons, the Goddess immediately disappears, and her two followers continue to sing her praises with devotion.

Jain Puranas and Jinasena's *Adi Purana*

Jain Puranas constitute a rich and varied genre of religious literature. These Puranas include elaborate retellings of stories known from the Sanskrit epics: the lives of the central characters, Rama and Krishna. The earliest of these, Vimalasuri's *Paumachariya* of the fourth century CE, narrates the adventures of Rama, as discussed in chapter 8. Within the Hindu epics, local heroes Rama and Krishna are transfigured into incarnations of the god Vishnu. Jain versions, by contrast, treat them as humans who exemplify Jain virtues. Jain Puranas, in Padmanabh Jaini's apt phrase, offer a "counter-tradition" to the theistic Sanskrit epics and Hindu Puranas.[9]

The most esteemed among Jain Puranas are designated as Mahapuranas. These works describe and narrate the stories of all sixty-three "great persons" (*shalaka-purusha*) recognized within Jain religious culture. This group includes world-conquering Chakravartins and other heroic characters. The most heroic members, however, are the twenty-four Tirthankaras, the ford makers who have attained Moksha and have forged the path for others to follow. In our present epoch, Jains say, the first Tirthankara was Rishabha; the list of Tirthankaras ends with the "historical" founders of the Jain religious community, Parshvanatha and Mahavira.

The earliest Jain Mahapurana is the work of two Digambara Jain monks of ninth-century Karnataka, Jinasena and his pupil Gunasena. Jinasena evidently acted as preceptor or adviser to the Rashtrakuta ruler Amoghavarsha (r. 814–877 CE) at a time when the Rashtrakutas were the most powerful imperial dynasty of the subcontinent. He completed the first half of the Sanskrit Mahapurana, called the *Adi Purana*, which tells in profuse detail the story of Rishabha, the first Tirthankara and thus the exemplary founder of the Jain order. It also narrates the career of his son Bharata, the exemplary Chakravartin. Gunasena was left with the task of relating the lives of the other twenty-three Tirthankaras and other great persons, necessarily in much briefer fashion.

In the comprehensive style of a Purana, Jinasena begins his account by situating Rishabha in a broader cosmological setting, leading up to the formation of human society. At the beginning of things, humans live in a paradise. Wish-fulfilling trees supply everything needed to sustain life. But the trees eventually disappear, and it becomes necessary for humans to organize themselves. They need to grow food, preserve and distribute it, and protect it from greedy people. Later, during the lifetime of Rishabha, various means of livelihood diversify: agriculture, arts, crafts, commerce, recordkeeping, and governance. From this gradual evolution of an occupational division come classes of people who come to be known as Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. In pointed contrast to the Vedic origin story of a primordial sacrifice, Jinasena emphasizes that all humans originally belong to a single "human jati." Differentiation comes about through the division of labor. The Brahmin class comes about still later, in Jinasena's account, under the rule of Rishabha's son Bharata.

The lives of all Tirthankaras follow a pattern. For each, there are five auspicious events: conception, birth, renunciation (called *diksha*), enlightenment (*kaivalya*), and final liberation (Moksha). Jinasena gives an elaborate account of Rishabha's glorious birth. The gods celebrate it. Indra comes down to earthly Ayodhya, where Rishabha is born, and takes the newborn off on his elephant Airavata to the heavenly Mount Sumeru. There, both Indra and his spouse Indrani venerate the child with an abhisheka of 1,008 pots of special water, rub his body with fragrant oils, and honor him with hymns of praise. After the gods have taken their opportunity to perform these exemplary acts of puja, they return Rishabha to his human mother.

Jinasena narrates Rishabha's youth, his marriage, and his fathering of several children, including his eldest son Bharata. Rishabha becomes king and sets out the codes of conduct for the various classes of society. In this way Jinasena incorporates a treatise on Dharma, Jain style, into his Purana. But in due course Rishabha recognizes the impermanence of all things and experiences an aversion to his worldly life. This leads him to renounce his kingdom. His son Bharata becomes the new ruler. Rishabha removes all his garments and jewelry, sits down with crossed legs, and plucks out his hair. At this moment of renunciation, says Jinasena, Rishabha's body glowed so brilliantly that even Indra with his thousand eyes could not gaze on it enough. Once again Indra is moved to celebrate the Tirthankara-to-be with a praise song. The old Vedic gods inhabit this Jain world, but they are always made to acknowledge the greater status of the human Jinas.

Rishabha now begins his renunciatory practice. Others join him at first, but they are unable to sustain Rishabha's rigorous asceticism, and they drift away. As homeless mendicants, these lapsed ascetics become the founders of other Shramana religious communities like the Ajivakas and the Trident Bearers. Eventually Rishabha attains enlightenment. As at his birth and renunciation, the gods mark this auspicious event with a great celebration. They institute a massive assembly, with Rishabha seated at the center on a lion throne, under a royal umbrella, fanned by fly-whisks. Indra and the other gods enact their veneration with folded hands, bows, circumambulations, and hymns of praise. The iconography and etiquette of a royal court are suitable for this foremost ascetic. And while Rishabha sits on his throne, the god Saudharmendra celebrates him by reciting his 1,008 names. All the vocabulary of the Absolute, as well as many of the epithets of the Hindu gods Brahman, Vishnu, and Shiva, turn out to be names of Rishabha. As Padmanabh Jaini puts it, "Jinasena seems to have set his sights on claiming the functions of the Purāṇic holy trinity for the founder of Jainism."[10]

In his *Adi Purana*, Jinasena also narrates the story of Rishabha's son and royal successor, Bharata. After Rishabha's enlightenment, Bharata sets out on a digvijaya. As in Kalidasa's account of Raghu's campaign, Jinasena here details all the encounters as Bharata marches east, south, west, and north in his conquest of the directions. After returning to his capital city, Bharata delivers a lengthy discourse on the subject of Artha.

The *Adi Purana* presents a Jain rejoinder to the theism of the Hindu Puranas. Here, it is the accomplishment of the exemplary human, the first Tirthankara Rishabha, that forms the pivot of the cosmos. At each of Rishabha's auspicious moments, the gods lead in the acknowledgment and celebration of his preeminence. The *Adi Purana* also reflects Jinasena's interest in social and royal matters. As a Digambara monk who was also a preceptor within the imperial Rashtrakuta court, Jinasena offers an alternative way of viewing social classes—not as given in creation, but as the contingent outcome of occupational division. He celebrates the digvijaya of King Bharata, and he incorporates as part of his narrative Rishabha's teachings on Dharma and Bharata's on Artha, from a Jain perspective.

Reflections on Hindu Theism

In many respects, the Puranas take up where the Sanskrit epics left off. Like the epics, the Puranas aim at a comprehensive, encyclopedic presentation encompassing diverse teachings. Like the epics, they focus primarily on the concerns of males of the upper classes—Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and wealthy Vaishyas—but they also seek to address a broader audience than the older Vedas or the newer courtly Sanskrit. They claim an affiliation with the Vedic legacy, but they present significantly new religious teachings revolving around new theologies of new Supreme Deities. Though the term is anachronistic, I call these formulations of Hindu theism.

That is not to say that the Puranas present a uniform "Puranic Hinduism." They are too extensive and too heterogeneous; they constitute a library rather than a scripture. Individual Puranas or sections of Puranas set forth distinctive teachings and practices directed toward Vishnu Narayana, Shiva Mahadeva, or the Great Goddess Mahadevi, each with their own divine personality. Yet they also locate them within a shared cosmos. In the *Devi Mahatmya*, Medhas recognizes other deities like Vishnu and Shiva while giving a vivid portrayal of the powerlessness of these male deities and the supremacy of the Mahadevi. In the *Vishnu Purana*, the preceptor Parashara grants roles for Brahman as cosmic creator and Shiva as destroyer, even while asserting that these seemingly autonomous deities are in fact functional forms of the single god Vishnu. In the *Kurma Purana*, Shiva treats Vishnu as his lieutenant and allows both Brahman and Vishnu to play roles in his cosmic actions. All grant some recognition to the older Vedic deities like Indra and Agni, but often in narrative frames that depict them as defeated by demons and requiring higher assistance. Within this divinely populated cosmos, it is a question of hierarchy: Who is the Highest Lord?

Vishnu, Shiva, and Mahadevi are the principal deities of Hindu theism as it begins to take shape in the Gupta Era and then proliferates in subsequent centuries. Each deity presides over a pantheon of great complexity, and the worldly interventions of these High Gods are described in a great host of narratives we call "myths," told and retold with significant variations throughout the Puranas and beyond. The Puranas also set out a plethora of religious practices aimed at both worldly well-being and transcendent liberation: pilgrimage, gift giving, devotional attentiveness, varieties of yogic self-restraints, visualization practices, intellectual recognition or gnosis, and material offerings to gods in icon form. So at the end of the *Devi Mahatmya*, when Suratha and Sumadhi have come to a proper understanding of the Mahadevi thanks to the storytelling instruction of Medhas, they undertake a program of austerities and icon veneration that leads eventually to Mahadevi herself appearing before them and granting their wishes. One receives worldly benefits and the other gains liberating understanding.

The Mahadevi image that Suratha and Sumadhi worship appears modest. But from the Gupta Era on, devotees of the principal deities of Hindu theism began to construct larger and more complex homes or palaces to house theses embodied gods and to develop more elaborate liturgical programs to honor them. By the eleventh century, the religious culture of temple Hinduism had reached a massive scale throughout southern Asia. Rulers involved themselves and brought ever-greater resources to support these religious institutions. It was a way to ensure that the gods could dwell more permanently and more regally within their domains. In the next chapter we trace the early phases of medieval temple Hinduism.

14

Homes for Gods (460 CE–700 CE)

AT TIRUCHIRAPALLI IN TAMILNADU, an immense rock outcropping rises two hundred yards above the Kaveri River. Early in the seventh century, the Pallava ruler Mahendravarman I (r. 590–630 CE) decided to build a home for the god Shiva atop the cliff. As his court poet states in a poem inscribed at the site:

> King Mahendravarman, abounding in virtues, placed a stone body in this wonderful home at the top of this Indra among mountains and established Shiva there, in accord with his title as the Firm One (Sthanu). And Mahendra himself stands firm in all the worlds along with Shiva.
>
> King Mahendra, the wrestler of his enemies, made a home on this mountain for the Lord of Mountains, Shiva, husband of the daughter of Himalaya, Indra among mountains, so that Shiva could be true to his title as Lord of Mountains.[1]

He goes on to explain that Shiva himself had put in a request for the home, and the king complied.

> "How might I stay in a home on earth and observe the might of the Cholas or the broad River Kaveri?" When Shiva graciously asked this, Mahendra, like King Manu in his sovereignty, granted him a home on this mountain touching the clouds.
>
> "Let it be made!" And so that preeminent person Mahendra, who keeps Shiva always in his mind, ordered that a matchless stone body of Shiva be made and placed at the top, fulfilling the purpose of this high peak.

Ruling from Kanchipuram, the Pallavas had extended their authority southward into the Kaveri basin, long the domain of the Chola dynasty. Control over the primary river of the Tamil region prompted Mahendravarman to imagine that he was bringing the river-loving god Shiva—who had caught the Ganges in his hair when it fell from heaven—from northern India to the south. Perhaps, the court poet speculates, the daughter of the Himalaya mountain might follow.

> I wonder if Parvati, daughter of Himalaya—fearing that her husband Shiva, who loves rivers, might fall in love when he sees the lovely charms of Kaveri, whose waves are so pleasing to the eye and who wears a garland of gardens—may have left her father's family and settled permanently here on this mountain too, calling this river the wife of the Pallava king.

Appropriately, the stone body that the king had carved on the rear wall of the hilltop cave-temple was that of Shiva as Gangadhara, the lord "who bears the Ganga in his hair" (**Fig. 51**). For Mahendravarman and the Pallavas, the Kaveri was the new Ganges. A Shiva Linga stood at the center of the rock-cut shrine as its main icon for worship.

Mahendravarman had previously supported the Jain community, but through this act of patronage he declared his great support for Shiva.

> Under the rule of King Mahendra, known as the one who abounds in virtues, who by making this Linga of Shiva became a *lingin* (one who bears the mark of Shiva), may the knowledge of Shiva spread through this world for a long time, and turn it away from contrary practices.
>
> This mountain is like the crown of the Chola territory. This Shiva-shrine is like its crown jewel. And its brilliance resembles the brilliance of Shiva himself.
>
> With a stone chisel, an earthly body of Shiva, the Faithful One, was made, and by it too a body of his eternal fame was created.

As the poet sees it, the stone body for Shiva to inhabit would be an eternal source of fame for both the god and the king who had ordered it to be carved.

The idea that one could sculpt an earthly body for a god with a chisel was not at all a new one. Nor was the religious understanding that a god could make himself or herself present in that human-fabricated body. Nor was royal patronage directed toward one of the rising Hindu deities an innovation. But in the two centuries between the Guptas' Vaishnava transformation of Udayagiri hill to Mahendravarman's hilltop shrine for Shiva at Tiruchirapalli, religious cultures centered around temples of the gods had proliferated across the subcontinent. I call this "temple Hinduism" when it involves the gods of the Hindu pantheon. However, it was not just the Hindus who promoted these religious practices.

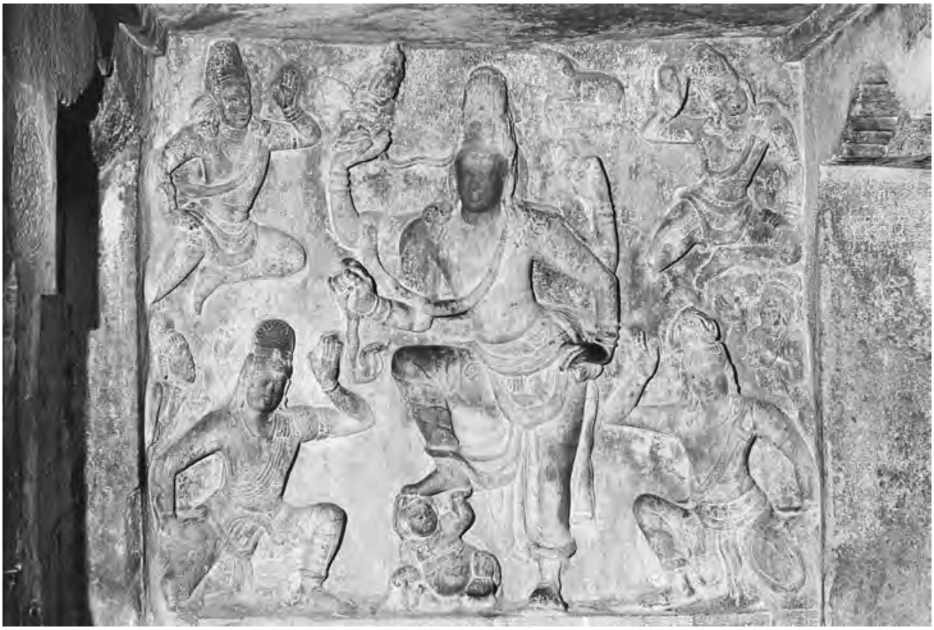


FIGURE 51. Shiva Gangadhara, relief panel, Tiruchirapalli, Tamilnadu, early 7th century CE. Photo by John C. Huntington. Courtesy of the John C. and Susan L. Huntington Photographic Archive of Buddhist and Asian Art.

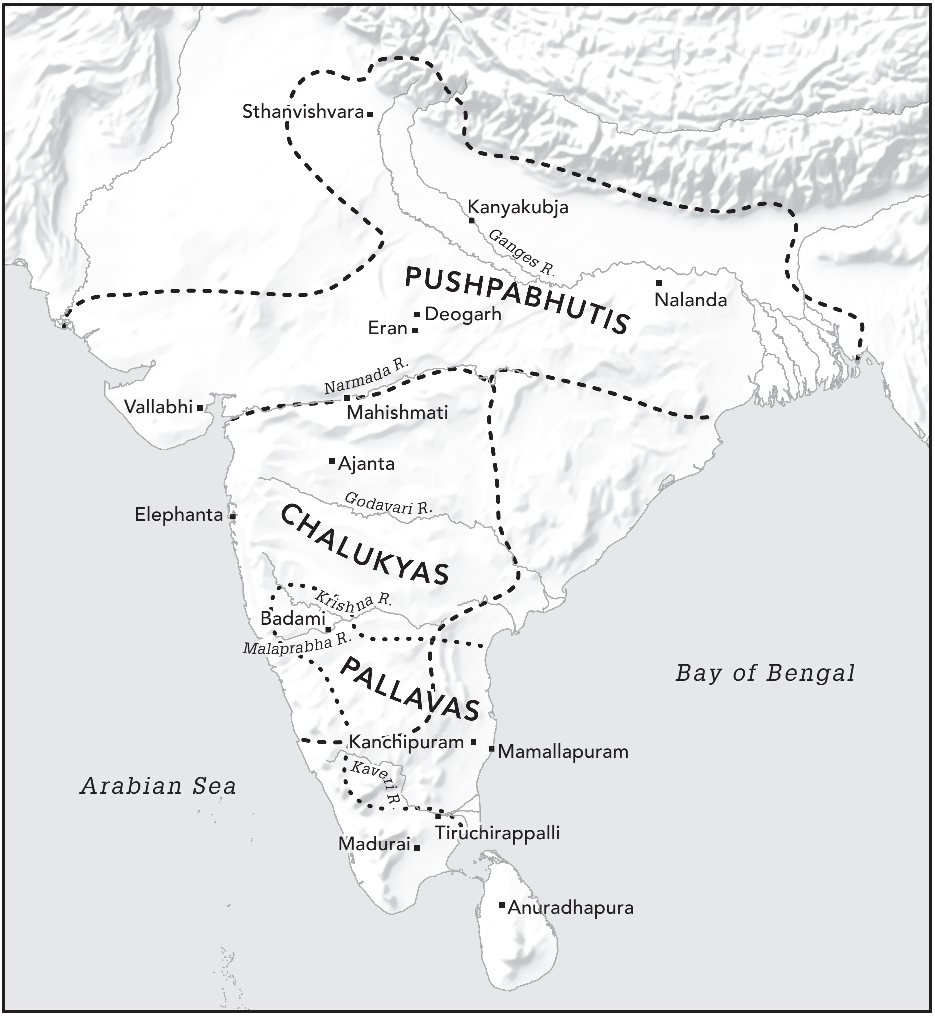
Buddhists constructed monastic complexes where the Buddha Shakyamuni lived and presided as master. Jains built temples in honor of Mahavira and the other Tirthankaras. By the seventh century (and even more over the next several centuries), increasingly impressive stone shrines and temples dotted the religious landscape of southern Asia. This was true as far south as Tamilnadu, and it spread into Southeast Asia.[2] Many of these temples, like Mahendravarman's home for Shiva, reflected royal initiative and patronage. Constructing a great religious home for a god within one's realm became a means by which ambitious kings could proclaim their regional authority or even their imperial overlordship.

Post-Gupta Politics and Religious Transformations

By the end of the fifth century, Gupta authority in northern India had declined precipitously, and Vakataka sovereignty in the Deccan had disappeared. Under Toramana and Mihirakula, the Hunas established a polity in northwestern India reaching as far as Eran, but when Mihirakula died in 542 CE, that kingdom quickly declined. The political landscape of South Asia in the sixth century was shifting and complicated. It was one of those periods, as imagined in the *Mahabharata*, when the goddess Earth suffered from the ceaseless marching of Kshatriya warriors. Numerous ruling families and regional powers sought to establish new independent kingdoms in northern India: the Maukharis in Kanyakubja, the Pushpabhutis in Sthanvishvara near Kurukshetra, the Maitrakas in Vallabhi, and the later Guptas (but not the imperial ones) in Magadha. In the Deccan the Kalachuris founded a kingdom based in Mahishmati on the Narmada River, and farther south the Kadambas held sway. In the far south, the Pallavas formed a new kingdom in Kanchipuram, and the Pandyans took ancient Madurai as their capital.

Many of these new ruling families had previously been subordinates of the imperial Guptas and Vakatakas. Just as there were ceremonial practices by which subordinates accepted their subordination, so too there was a political rhetoric by which ambitious underlings could proclaim their autonomy. Declarations of independence took multiple forms. These included practical economic actions like minting one's own coins and collecting taxes on agriculture and trade without remitting them to any higher-ups. New kings would endeavor to set up their own royal courts, modeled on the Sanskritic style of the imperial Guptas, and patronize poets, musicians, and other luminaries to bring fame to the ruler. Kings would claim royal titles for themselves and issue inscriptions (composed by their own court poets) highlighting their own family genealogy and their own Dharma-kingliness rather than that of their former overlords. Religious ceremonial was also a key means of constructing royal authority—but different options existed. A newly autonomous ruler could make himself king and transform himself into a Kshatriya, if he wasn't one already, by performing the Vedic royal sacrifices of Rajasuya and Ashvamedha. Conspicuous patronage of the Buddhist or Jain community served as a king-making strategy for some. In post-Gupta India, as we will see, new options were also developed. One was to perform "great gift" ceremonies, drawn from the theistic Puranas rather than the older Vedas. Another was to construct homes for gods in one's own capital and territories, as Mahendravarman did at Tiruchirapalli. In medieval India this would prove an increasingly effective signifier in royal discourse.

By the beginning of the seventh century, three South Asian kingdoms had established themselves as preeminent regional powers: the Pushpabhutis, the Chalukyas, and the Pallavas (**Map 18**). Along the Ganges and Yamuna, the Pushpabhutis and the Maukharis formed an alliance, and in 606 CE the Pushpabhuti king Harshavardhana began his forty-one-year reign. He shifted the capital from the upper Yamuna to the more central Kanyakubja (modern Kannauj) on the



MAP 18. India in the Early Seventh Century CE

Ganges. During his rule, the Pushpabhutis held sway over subordinates in the Punjab, Kashmir, Nepal, and Gujarat.

Harsha's forebears had been devotees of Surya the Sun God. Harsha himself had been a votary of Shiva early on. But as he moved the capital from peripheral Sthanvishvara to Kanyakubja, and as he assumed full imperial titles like Maharaja Adhiraja ("supreme king over great kings"), he evidently turned to support the Buddhist order as more appropriate for an emperor. The model set by Ashoka was still a potent one. Like a proper Dharma-king, Harsha was inclusive in his religious patronage. The Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Xuanzang reached Kanyakubja in 637 CE. In his "Record of the Western Kingdoms," he describes its religious landscape as filled with monasteries and temples. At one place, just outside the city, Xuanzang speaks of a towering Buddhist temple of stone and brick, over two hundred feet high, housing a thirty-foot-tall standing Buddha statue. Near the Buddhist edifice, he says, there is a Surya temple and a temple dedicated to Shiva Maheshvara—both equal in size and grandeur to the Buddhist one.[3] Xuanzang also describes Harsha's annual gift-giving ceremonies. For twenty-one days the king holds large assemblies of religious specialists, both Shramanas and Brahmins, who are served delicious meals. Then comes the procession. King Harsha dresses as Indra, and the Kamarupa king dresses as Brahman. Other lesser kings stand in attendance. They all act as attendants to a special three-foot golden Buddha icon, which rides on a massive elephant. As he walks, writes Xuanzang, Harsha scatters pearls and jewels as offerings to the Buddhist order. Harsha bathes the image with perfumed water and then presents jewels, gems, and precious cloth to it.[4] Thus the Maharaja Adhiraja enacts his own fealty to the Buddha, seen as the still higher Cosmic Overlord.

In the Deccan, the Chalukyas became the dominant imperial power. Their independent rule began in 543 CE, when Pulakeshin I broke away from his Kadamba overlords and set up a new capital in Badami (ancient Vatapi), a well-defended location near the Malaprabha River (a tributary of the Krishna River). In a short Sanskrit inscription carved high on an inaccessible cliff at Badami, Pulakeshin records his king-making actions. In addition to building a formidable fort-city at Badami, he has performed the Ashvamedha and other Vedic rites, following Shrauta procedures. In addition, he has also conducted a "Golden Embryo" ritual, one of sixteen royal gift ceremonies (*mahadana*) described in the Vaishnava *Matsya Purana*.[5] The early Chalukya rulers took Vishnu's boar incarnation, Varaha, as their royal emblem and claimed they had received it directly from Vishnu Narayana himself. Following Pulakeshin I, his successors Kirtivarman I and Mangalesha expanded Chalukya authority outward until, during the reign of Pulakeshin II (r. 610–642 CE), it encompassed most of the Deccan, from the Arabian Sea to the Bay of Bengal. Pulakeshin's court poet celebrated his digvijaya in an inscriptional prashasti.

> Full of the powers of energy, self-mastery, and good counsel, Pulakeshin conquered all the directions, removed the mighty kings, honored gods and Brahmins, and then returned to his capital city of Badami. Under his rule, this wide earth is like one city, with the deep waters of the billowing ocean as its moat.[6]

In the early seventh century, the Narmada River separated the lines of authority of two ambitious imperial rulers, Harshavardhana to its north and Pulakeshin II to its south.

As the Chalukya area of rule expanded, the rulers and elites undertook a policy of vigorous temple construction in Badami and the surrounding area. Initially they excavated rock-cut cave temples, in the manner of earlier builders in western India. By the reign of Pulakeshin II, they were building structural temples in permanent stone. The shrines were dedicated to multiple deities and their religious communities: Vaishnavas, Shaivas, worshippers of Surya the Sun God, the Buddhists, and the Jains. Some of the new homes for the gods were under direct sponsorship of the rulers themselves, others were sponsored by members of the royal family and court, and still others by local communities of merchants or agriculturalists. All in all, over one hundred new temples appeared in the Malaprabha River valley during the early Chalukya period, in the two centuries beginning with Pulakeshin I's declaration of independence at Badami.

Meanwhile, to the southeast of Chalukya territories, the Pallavas based in Kanchipuram established a powerful independent polity in the Tamil region. The earliest Pallava rulers, in the fourth century CE, issued their public inscriptions in the Prakrit language. Most often these record the land grants given to Vedic Brahmins to support their sacrificial rites. But with the rulers Simhavishnu (r. 574–600 CE) and Mahendravarman, Pallava power expanded to include the Chola area along the Kaveri River to their south. The Pallava rulers began to portray themselves in broader, imperial terms. They adopted pan-Indian Sanskrit for their inscriptions and organized a cosmopolitan court. Simhavishnu brought the poet Damodara from the Vidarbha region in the north to serve as court poet. (Damodara was great-grandfather of the celebrated Sanskrit author and literary theorist Dandin, who was court poet under a later Pallava ruler, Narasimhavarman II.[7]) With Mahendravarman, as we've seen, the construction of a home for the god Shiva to dwell in his own territory became an important royal action. Mahendravarman also began the excavations and temple constructions at Mamallapuram, the Pallava port city. His son and successor Narasimhavarman I (r. 630–668) expanded this project to transform Mamallapuram into an extraordinary garden of religious sculpture.

The military history of the early seventh century consists of a series of campaigns in which these three subcontinental powers competed with one another to establish themselves as the dominant empire of South Asia. For religious history, the three dynasties set a new model for Dharma-kings. They drew on existing patterns, but they added new elements. Each dynasty organized a Gupta-style court. They invited Sanskrit literati to grace their capitals. The kings Harshavardhana and Mahendravarman themselves composed poems and dramas in Sanskrit. They issued royal prashastis in Sanskrit poetry, now a common practice throughout South Asia and, by the seventh century, also in Southeast Asian polities. Like earlier rulers, they continued to encourage Vedic Brahmins to settle in their territories, with land grants to support their Vedic practices such as the domestic “five great sacrifices.” But the really great Vedic sacrifices, the public king-making ones such as the Rajasuya and the Ashvamedha, were placed in the past tense. The royal genealogies identified these as acts of dynastic founders in the past, rarely as sacrifices carried out by the current rulers.

The kings styled themselves as gift-givers in chief, royal philanthropists. The worthy recipients of their largesse were many: the poor and needy, the worthy Brahmins and Shramanas, and religious institutions. The highest recipients, however, were those universal beings who stood above the rulers. Though these kings and their courts were inclusive in supporting multiple religious communities, the rulers often signaled their own dynastic affiliation. For Harshavardhana, it was the Buddha who received the most sumptuous gifts in the annual gift-giving ceremony. Chalukya rulers Mangalesha and Pulakeshin II identified themselves as devotees of Vishnu Narayana and employed the Varaha form of Vishnu as their dynastic insignia. The Pallava king Mahendravarman turned from an earlier Jain affiliation to become a votary of Shiva, one who “bears the mark of Shiva.” These affirmations situated the rulers within an overarching hierarchy. While they were Maharaja Adhirajas, imperial rulers over other great kings, they were also devotees of a still higher being—Buddha, Vishnu, or Shiva,—understood as the cosmic overlord.

In this period, elite devotionalism took the physical form of sumptuous monasteries and temples. The purpose was to enable those higher beings to have a dwelling within the realm of the sponsoring ruler. In this chapter, we will look at a sequence of these new homes for the gods, from the late fifth through the end of the seventh centuries CE.

Ajanta: The Buddha in His Monastery

Thirty-six rock-cut monasteries and worship halls, carved into a natural wall of basalt rock, wind around a horseshoe-shaped gorge of the Waghur River at Ajanta, Maharashtra. The earliest of these caves were excavated during the period of Shatavahana rule in the area, roughly 100 BCE to 100 CE. The largest and most dramatic ones, however, were created during the reign of the Vakataka ruler

Harishena (r. 460–477 CE). He evidently devoted the great resources of his imperial court and encouraged royal officials and local feudatory rulers to participate in this royal project.[8] Chiseled deep into the stone hillside, carefully sculpted, and in many cases painted in brilliantly lively frescoes, the Ajanta caves became an extraordinary Buddhist center in the late fifth century.

After the fall of Vakataka rule in the area, Buddhist monks continued to reside in the cave monasteries for a time. But gradually the site was abandoned, and the Deccan forest reasserted its control of the place for many centuries. In the early nineteenth century, a British colonial officer, out with some companions to hunt tigers, "discovered" the site. Nearby residents knew of the Ajanta caves, of course, and a local sheepherder led the Englishman to see them. The officer promptly etched his presence across the chest of a painted Bodhisattva: "John Smith, 28th Cavalry, 28 April, 1819."[9] Since this British rediscovery, the Ajanta caves have become one of the premier tourist landmarks of South Asia, recognized since 1983 as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

At the center of the excavated caves, a gateway flanked by stone elephants and guarded by a Naga led from the river up to the row of caves. Immediately to one side of this entry point, Harishena's chief minister Varahadeva sponsored Cave 16.[10] Begun around 467 CE, with the ambition appropriate to a high court official, Cave 16 would act as a model for other excavations at Ajanta. It is a large monastic center (*vihara*), a combination dormitory and assembly hall. One enters across a porch, through one of three doorways, into a large squarish enclosed courtyard, about sixty-five feet by seventy-five feet. Within the court, twenty stone pillars form a peristyle. Around the main court, sixteen modest cells for individual monks branch out. At the rear center of the court, in a much larger and more elaborate cell, sits a large stone image of the Buddha Shakyamuni, seated on a lion throne with his feet dangling to the ground. His hands display the gesture of teaching **(Fig. 52)**. He is flanked by two sculpted chowrie bearers. In several areas of this cave monastery, paintings on a plaster surface survive: scenes of the Buddha's lifetime and of his past lives as told in the Jatakas. Originally many of the internal surfaces would have been covered in exuberant color.[11]

A vihara like this would have served multiple roles. The monastic cells offered accommodation for individual monks. The larger central court was a community gathering place for instruction in the Dharma, collective recitation, congregational ceremonies like the fortnightly Pratimoksha confessional, and communal meditation. All these activities would be carried out under the watchful gaze of the Buddha statue, presiding in his rear cell. In his foundation inscription, Varahadeva makes clear that this Buddha was more than just a stone sculpture.

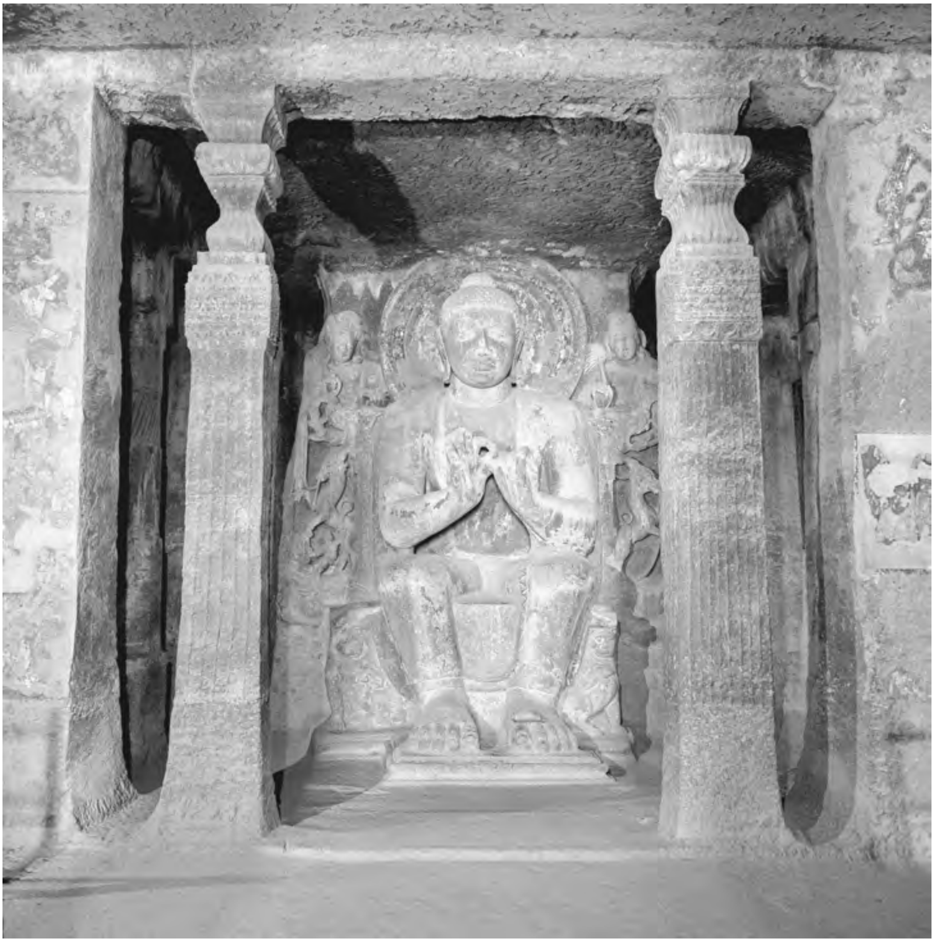


FIGURE 52. Buddha Shakyamuni, Cave 16, Ajanta, Maharashtra, 467 CE. Photo by John C. Huntington. Courtesy of the John C. and Susan L. Huntington Photographic Archive of Buddhist and Asian Art.

Harishena's chief minister Varahadeva came from a long line of Smarta Brahmins. In an inscription on the Buddhist cave at nearby Ghatotkacha, Varahadeva traces his lineage of eminent Brahmins from Vallura.[12] Collectively, these forebears embody the virtues one would want in a Brahmin minister at court: wisdom, learning, and mastery in the science of Artha. These Brahmins also performed their religious duties according to the Vedas and the Smritis, Varahadeva emphasizes. This Smarta background, however, in no way precludes

Varahadeva's praise for the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, or his material support for Buddhist monastic institutions at Ghatotkacha and Ajanta.

The excavation and artistic work at Cave 16 was concluded in 478 CE with the completion of the Buddha image, and Varahadeva celebrated the dedication of cave and image with an inscribed Sanskrit poem. He first traces the genealogy of King Harishena and praises his virtues. He explains that his own devotion to the Buddha, Teacher of the World, has led him to create this permanent structure. "Realizing that youth, life, wealth, and happiness are all transitory, Varahadeva has made this excellent home (*veshman*) for the Lord of Ascetics, for the benefit of his mother and father."[13] The minister then donates the cave residence to the Sangha.

It is clear that Varahadeva and those around him understood this monastic center to be a residence for the Buddha both as a living presence and as head of the Sangha in this location. The image of the Buddha with his teaching gesture at the rear of the court was in fact an embodiment of the living Buddha Shakyamuni in his "perfumed chamber" at Shravasti. And this understanding was not restricted to Varahadeva's Cave 16 or to Ajanta. It was reflected in both monastic architecture and in inscriptional language. As the Buddhist scholar Gregory Schopen shows, the "personal presence and permanent abiding of the Buddha" in monastic establishments throughout South Asia became pervasive and standard starting in the fourth or fifth century CE.[14] A Buddha image would be established or consecrated as a key part of the vihara layout. That living Buddha, Teacher of the World and Lord of Ascetics, would serve as master of the Sangha. He would also be prime recipient of donations, much as the Buddha Shakyamuni had been in his human lifetime.

This innovation in Buddhist religious culture parallels the new ideas and practices surrounding gods and their homes in Hindu theistic circles.

Deogarh: A Bhagavata Home for Vishnu (500–525 CE)

The Vishnu temple at Deogarh ("god's house") sits near a bend in the Betwa River, downstream from Vidisha, near the base of a rocky headland. From Mauryan times, trade routes have followed the Betwa, passing through Deogarh on the way to Vidisha, Ujjayini, and the ports of the Arabian Sea coast. Jains and Buddhists occupied the area around Deogarh, and there is still an impressive hilltop Jain shrine overlooking Deogarh.[15] In the early sixth century, Bhagavata devotees of Vishnu constructed a temple there—often misleadingly called the "Dashavatara," or ten-incarnation temple. It is one of the earliest and best preserved structural temples built in stone remaining in South Asia.[16]

The temple stands on a raised square plinth, about nine feet high (**Plate 7**). Four broad staircases lead up to the elevated platform. In its center is a square building, about eighteen feet on each side. A west-facing doorway opens to the interior room of the shrine, known as the *garbhagriha*, or "womb-house." Here in the womb of the temple is where the primary icon would reside. Rising above this central structure is a towering curvilinear *shikhara* (top or summit, as of a mountain), now in shambles. At the four corners of the platform are the foundations of four smaller ancillary shrines. This arrangement is known as the *panchayatana*, or "five-shrine" temple model. It is not known what deities would have resided in these subsidiary shrines.

Though no icon remains in the garbhagriha, the main temple is clearly dedicated to Vishnu Narayana. The sculptural elaboration on the outer skin of the temple makes that clear. It offers a rich portrait of Vishnu in his multiple aspects and roles. Above the highly decorated doorway to the sanctum, a four-armed Vishnu sits in a posture of regal ease on a throne formed by the coils of the cosmic snake Ananta ("endless"). The snake spreads his multiple hoods over Vishnu's head, forming a royal canopy. The goddess Lakshmi sits at Vishnu's feet. At his sides are two incarnate forms of Vishnu, Narasimha ("man-lion") and Vamana ("dwarf"). The figure on the lintel above a temple doorway indicates the primary deity who resides within the shrine.

Circumambulating the west-facing temple, one encounters three remarkable relief panels on the north, east, and south walls. In the north panel, the lord of elephants Gajendra is caught in the clutches of a Naga, and Vishnu rides to the rescue atop his winged Garuda. To the east, one meets with two ascetic figures conversing peacefully in a forest setting: a two-armed Nara ("man") and four-armed Narayana. According to the *Mahabharata*, Nara may be identified with Arjuna, and Narayana with Krishna. If the rescue of Gajendra illustrates Vishnu's salvific abilities, the Nara-Narayana panel shows the god in a teaching mode. The south panel, richest and most complex of the three, presents Vishnu's role as Lord of Creation (**Fig. 53**). As he reclines on Ananta, Lakshmi gently massages his feet. Stimulated by her attention, a long lotus stalk emerges from Vishnu's navel, winds around him, and floats to the top of the panel, where the creator god Brahman sits. Under Vishnu's direction, it is Brahman who carries out the actual tasks of creating, or re-creating, the world in each new era. Along the top register, other gods fly in to participate in this great cosmic commencement: Skanda on his peacock, Indra on the elephant Airavata, Shiva and Parvati riding the bull Nandin, and other superhuman figures less readily identifiable. Beneath Vishnu, in a lower register of the panel, stand five male figures and one female. This group

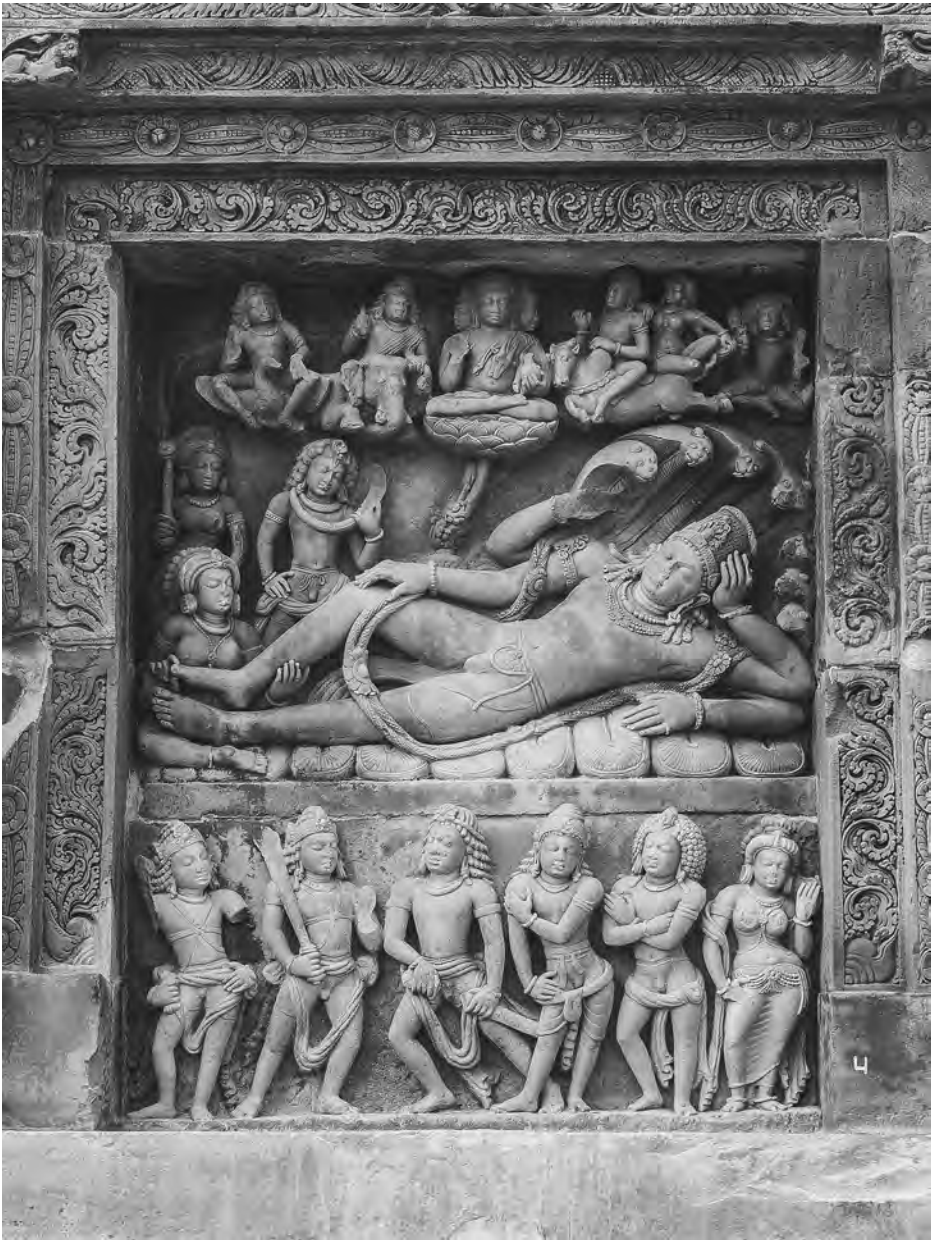


FIGURE 53. Vishnu Anantashayana, south wall relief panel, Deogarh, Uttar Pradesh, 500–525 CE.

refers most likely to the story of Madhu and Kaitubha, the two demons who tried unsuccessfully to prevent creation from going forward.

The sculptural style throughout the Deogarh temple is "Gupta ideal," as art historian Susan Huntington puts it. The sculpted figures have smooth bodily contours, restrained jewelry, benign facial expressions, and graceful poses.[17] But this stylistic connection should not be confused with Gupta imperial patronage. Artisans at Deogarh may have been working in a familiar sculptural style, but the Guptas had little to no political authority in this region when the temple was constructed. It is not clear who might have exercised power here in the early sixth century. The Hunas had ruled in the area around this time. There is no evidence of any royal involvement. Only one inscription has been found at the site, on a detached pillar. It reads: "This is the name of the illustrious Bhagavata Govinda, votary of the Lord of Keshavapura."[18] Evidently Deogarh was once called Keshavapura, the city of long-haired Vishnu, and the temple enshrined Vishnu as the lord of this place. But who was the lord's illustrious follower Govinda? Was he responsible for just the pillar, or sponsor of the temple itself? Was he a wealthy trader, an ambitious local ruler, or a minister of some other king?

Though we cannot resolve the question of who built this early-sixth-century temple to Vishnu, we can gain a sense of its ritual life and religious significance from contemporary Purana literature. The Vishnu-centric *Matsya Purana* (the title refers to Vishnu's fish incarnation) contains an eighteen-chapter treatise on Vastu, the science of constructing dwelling places, or architecture. This section was composed most likely in the sixth or seventh century, making it one of the earliest extant works in this discipline.[19] The work covers a wide range of topics, but here we are concerned with the ritual procedures surrounding the construction of dwelling places for gods.

The narrator Suta begins by praising the great benefits of such activities.

> I will tell you the discipline of action (*kriyayoga*) that consists of the honoring of deities and the narration of their deeds. Nothing else in all the worlds provides as much worldly benefits and liberation. Establishment (*pratishtha*) of the gods, honoring of the deities, telling stories of their deeds, sacrifices to the gods, and festivals are the means by which one is liberated from bondage. (MP 258.2-3)

This discipline of action begins with the fabrication of images. Suta sets out detailed guidelines for how such images should look. This includes both iconography and iconometry. It is important not only that icons have the proper number of arms and hold the correct implements, but also that the proportions of their bodies be pleasing and correct. This being a Vaishnava text, Suta begins his account of images with forms of Vishnu. Then he goes on to discuss suitable icons for many other deities in the growing Hindu pantheon: Shiva, Skanda, Ganesha, Katyayani, Durga Mahishasuramardini, Indra, Surya, Agni, Yama, the World Guardians, the Divine Mothers, and others.

Once a divine image has been fabricated, it must be properly consecrated. The procedure is known as *pratishtha*, ritual establishment, and Suta's guidelines echo those of earlier works like Baudhayana's *Parishishta*, but in an expanded form. First the officiants must put up a temporary pavilion adjacent to the shrine where the new god will reside. In addition to the preparatory fire rites, the ritual participants should observe a period of *adhivasana*, "dwelling near the god," for a number of nights ranging from one up to seven. At the completion of this initial phase, the officiating priest should place the image on a suitable platform and perform an elaborate abhisheka or anointment. These manifold substances, poured over the icon, confer powers onto it, much as the royal abhisheka of the Rajasuya infuses powers into a newly consecrated king. Finally, the priest ritually inscribes eyes onto the image. This is the moment at which the image becomes a fully empowered icon for worship. In the *Matsya Purana*, Suta directs officiants to employ Vedic mantras during these rites, and he insists that a chief priest should be well versed in the Vedas, the Puranas, and the Vastu Shastra. Though the honoring of images is a post-Vedic practice, this early Purana continues to utilize a Vedic ritual grammar. Over the coming centuries, this would change, as new "tantric" mantras and practices were incorporated into temple ritual.

Once the image is fully established, Suta prescribes that priests and worshippers celebrate a great festival (*mahotsava*), lasting from three to ten days. Suta does not provide a description, but certainly this festival would have included elaborate bathing rituals (of as many as a thousand pots of liquid substances), fire rites, and dramatic processions of the image throughout the surrounding community. We have already noticed the Buddhist image processions observed by Chinese pilgrims. Here is another example of religious practice shared among theist Hindus and non-theist Buddhists. Such festival processions of divine images would become one of the most visible and dramatic features in the religious culture of Hindu temples in early medieval India, and they continue in many regions up to the present.[20]

Elephanta: Cave Home of Shiva, Lord of Creatures (c. 550 CE)

To reach the Shiva cave at Elephanta requires a kind of pilgrimage. One first takes a boat from the mainland, departing nowadays from Mumbai's Gateway of India, across the waters to Elephanta Island. After disembarking, one climbs a steep hill to an open courtyard and then enters the excavated cave. In the darkened interior of the cave, one encounters a most amazing shrine of the god Shiva.

The cave has two entrances, in fact. If one enters from the east, a pillared hall leads the devotee to an inner shrine. This is the cave temple's sanctum, the garbhagriha, and it houses a large bare-stone Shiva Linga. The interior shrine has doorways on all four sides, with ten-foot-tall stone guards standing on both sides of each door. This would have been the normal route for a pilgrim: from the eastern entry, into the darkness of the cave, approaching the enshrined Linga as the temple's primary icon.

The cave temple at Elephanta is unique, however, in incorporating a second axis into its basic design.[21] One can also enter the cave from the north. Along this route, one moves through the same pillared hall toward an enormous three-faced image of Shiva Maheshvara, the Great Lord, commanding the center of the cave's south wall. Within the cave temple are numerous large relief panels, but Maheshvara dominates the entire space. His right face has a gentle feminine expression. The left face bears a fierce, masculine aspect. The central face appears introspective and serene. Scholars have long debated the identity and meaning of this unique and powerful work of religious sculpture. Perhaps, some have argued, it should be called Sadashiva, the five-faced Eternal Shiva, in accord with the theology of the Shaiva Siddhanta school. Or perhaps it represents the unification of all the other more particular manifestations of Shiva seen throughout the cave temple.

Within the main temple are eight other large sculptural panels, each portraying some aspect of Shiva or one of his mythical deeds.[22] We see Shiva impaling the demon Andhaka on his trident. Shiva meditates and Shiva dances (**Fig. 54**). We see Shiva's wedding with Parvati, and we see the two of them enjoying a moment of intimacy atop Mount Kailasa, even as the demon Ravana tries to lift up the mountain and disrupt their pleasure. In one panel, Shiva catches the Ganges River in his hair, and Parvati leans away from him in jealousy and anger. In another we see Shiva and Parvati merged into a single being, in the form known as Ardhanarishvara, the Lord who is half-female. Collectively these panels emphasize a central theme in the theological character of the god Shiva. He is a god

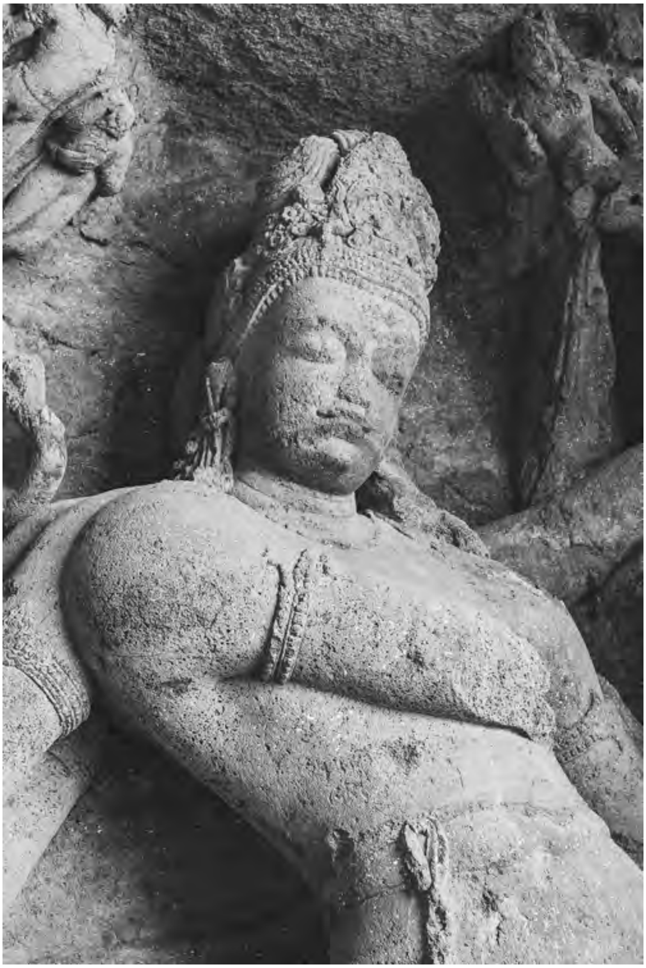


FIGURE 54. Dancing Shiva, Elephanta Cave Temple, Maharashtra, 6th century CE.

who conjoins and transcends what, from our more limited worldly perspective, appear to be opposites. The panels juxtapose his violent demon-destroying activity and his peaceful marriage, his wild dangerous dance and his meditative stasis. Shiva is erotic and ascetic, dynamic and yet unchanging. He is separate from his female consort Parvati and yet one with her. Such paradoxes are at the core of Shiva's fundamental nature.

Each panel shows Shiva as its inescapable center, but each is crowded with other figures as well. Other deities, celestial dancers and musicians, dwarf-like *ganas* (Shiva's "troops"), and human sages all throng to be part of Shiva's world in these sculptural compositions. Most obvious are the members of Shiva's divine family: his wife Parvati, his two sons Ganesha and Skanda, his bull Nandin, and his most favored devotee, the skeletal Bhringin. Other gods also join in. Vishnu flies in on his Garuda, Indra rides on his elephant Airavata, and four-faced Brahman floats on his swan-seat or arrives to officiate at the wedding. Still other gods, sometimes too eroded to identify, clamor in from the sides. The master architect and other agents responsible for the design of the Elephanta cave temple envision Shiva not as a singular monotheistic deity, but as the dominant central lord within a complex and ranked pantheon.

Who were these agents? The cave temple at Elephanta articulates, as far as we can tell, the religious perspective of the Pashupata order of Shaiva devotees. The Pashupatas were the earliest organized school among the Shaivas. We have encountered them already in the *Kurma Purana*, where Shiva delivers his teachings to a group of ascetics and grants them a vision of this cosmic dance. Another early work in the same genre, the *Skanda Purana* (dated to roughly 550–650 CE), sets out an origin story for the Pashupata order.[23]

Shiva descends to earth in every cosmic age. He always descends, claims the *Skanda Purana*, in the same place, namely Karohana (modern Karvan) in southwestern Gujarat, just north of the mouth of the Narmada River. In this Kali Yuga, the story goes, he descends in the form of Lakulisha, the Lord holding a club. To prepare for his apparition, Shiva emits four Brahmin males from his four mouths. Then as Lakulisha, he travels around India to meet and teach each of these four disciples. He finds the first one, Kaushika, in Ujjayini. Lakulisha goes to the cremation grounds there, covers himself in ashes, picks up a firebrand with his left hand, and then accepts Kaushika as his student. Continuing his travels, he meets up with another in Jambumarga (in Rajasthan), a third in Mathura, and the fourth in Kanyakubja—all major religious centers of northern India. Lakulisha imparts to each pupil the supreme secret of the Pashupata order, called the *panchartha* (five topics). This teaching will free Brahmins from their bondage to death, and it is to be administered through a ceremony of *diksha*, or initiation. He then charges these disciples with the task of spreading these teachings.

The *Skanda Purana* story of dissemination of Pashupata teachings, instigated by Shiva in a human incarnation, emphasizes that it is directed toward Brahmin male ascetics, and unruly ones at that. They frequent cremation grounds and cover themselves in the ashes of incinerated human bodies. And the earliest Pashupata work—the *Pashupata Sutras* with the commentary of Kaundinya, dated to the fourth century CE—reflects this renunciatory and antinomian orientation.

According to the guidelines of this text, the Pashupata adept (*sadhaka*) goes through three stages of discipline. In the first stage, he bathes himself in ashes and honors Shiva by bellowing like a bull and dancing wildly like Shiva. At a second stage he is directed to go about in public seeking dishonor. He should act in such a way that others cast him out and consider him depraved. He shakes, trembles, limps, makes obscene gestures, and acts as if drunk or mad. Receiving ill-treatment from others, the text claims, will result in removing one's own karmic bondage. Daniel Ingalls points to the sadhaka's double role: "The aspirant hoped to transform himself first into the Lord's beast and finally into the Lord of Beasts himself."[24] In his third and final stage, the adept finds an isolated cave and meditates and then moves to a cremation ground where he ultimately becomes united with Shiva, Lord of Creatures.

As its teachings traveled, the Pashupata order began to acknowledge and validate the less strenuous religious practices of worldly worshippers of Shiva. So the *Skanda Purana* addresses a more inclusive community of Pashupatas, both renunciatory *sadhakas* and this-worldly devotees of Shiva. It praises devotional practices such as the worship of the Shiva Linga and pilgrimage to the places sacred to Shiva. So, too, the *Ishvara Gita* of the *Kurma Purana* reflects this "kinder, gentler Pāśupata teaching," as Andrew Nicholson puts it.[25]

The praise of pilgrimage brings us back to the cave temple at Elephanta. By the sixth century, the Pashupata order was active in the northern Konkan coastal region around modern-day Mumbai. In addition to the Elephanta shrine (and there are several excavated caves there, in addition to the primary one), two other excavated temples show clear Pashupata affiliation: Jogeshvari and Mandapeshvari.[26] The entry to the earliest of these shrines, at Jogeshvari, features an image of Lakulisha with his club, surrounded by his four original disciples, on the lintel above the doorway (**Fig. 55**). Many of its relief panels depict the same subjects as the shrine at Elephanta, including the wedding of Shiva and Parvati, Ravana's attempt to raise Mount Kailasa, and Shiva's cosmic dance. It is as if the Jogeshvari excavation and sculptural program were a rehearsal for the more ambitious temple at Elephanta.

The execution of this enormous project at Elephanta, on a small offshore island, would have required considerable resources. Not only would a small army of excavators, artisans, sculptors, and supervisors be needed, but those workers would also require provisions, transported largely from the mainland. Who supplied these necessary resources? Who set out the plan and saw it through?

No inscription at Elephanta provides a definite answer to this question. However, it is likely that the Kalachuri ruler Krishnaraja involved himself in the

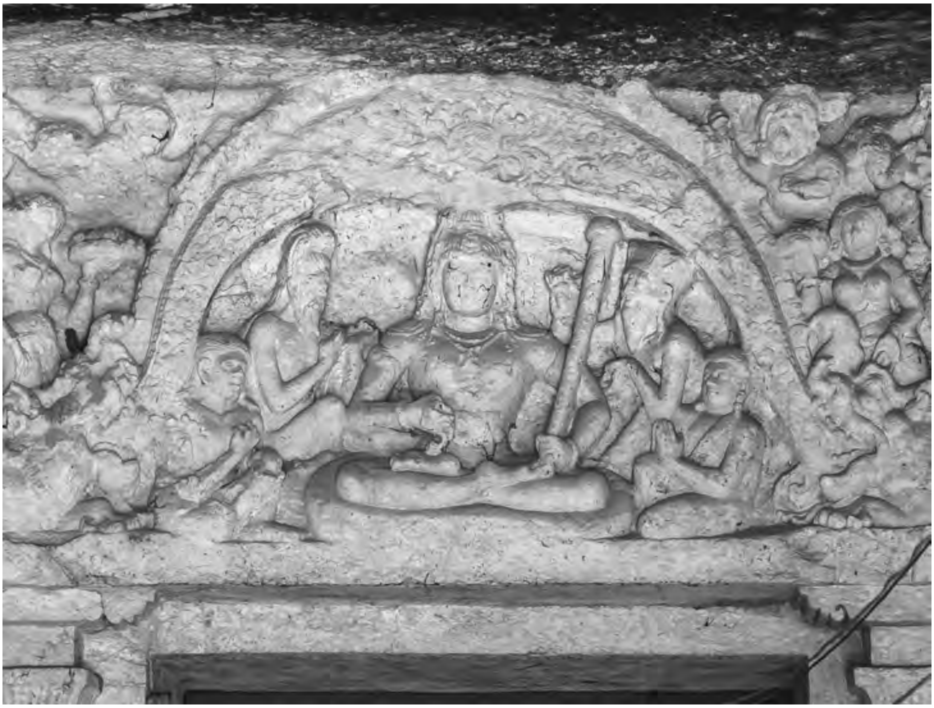


FIGURE 55. Lakulisha and Four Disciples, door relief panel, Jogeshvari Temple, Mumbai, Maharashtra, ca. 525 CE.

project. In the aftermath of the Guptas and Vakatakas, the Kalachuri family rose to prominence in western India in the sixth century. Taking Mahishmati on the Narmada River as their capital, the Kalachuris extended their power north into the areas around Ujjayini and Vidisha, and southward into Maharashtra. Their rule, or that of smaller subordinate feudatory rulers, extended over the northern Konkan coast where Jogeshvari and Elephanta are located. The Kalachuri rulers proclaimed themselves followers of Shiva Maheshvara, and several inscriptions identify the Kalachuri king Krishnaraja (r. 550–575 CE) as one who “from birth took refuge with Shiva Pashupata.”[27]

Not all large monuments in India are the result of royal patronage, of course. It is certainly possible that other resourceful sponsors could have undertaken this work. Wealthy merchant groups along the western coast, engaged in lucrative long-distance sea trade, might have been responsible.[28] Whoever planned and carried it out, Elephanta is clearly the result of a thoughtful, coherent, powerful, and well-funded project to create an island cave home for Shiva that would convey the complex theological identity of this Supreme Deity to the pilgrims who came to honor Shiva there.

The Chalukyas at Badami

Starting in 547 CE, when Pulakeshin I established the cliff fortress at Badami and declared his independence with royal ceremonial, he and his three successors enlarged the territories under Chalukya dominion for nearly a century. They defeated the Kadambas to their west then gained control over the local dynasties ruling the coastal regions along the Arabian Sea. By 600 CE, they were able to subdue the powerful Kalachuris in the northern Deccan. As their kingdom expanded, the Chalukyan rulers and their court elites began to transform Badami into an imperial capital inhabited by a host of gods and religious communities. The early Chalukya monarchs identified themselves as worshipers of Vishnu, and they took Varaha, the boar-incarnation who rescued the earth, as their royal insignia. But as Dharma-kings, they constructed homes not only for Vishnu, but also for Shiva and for Surya the Sun God. They sponsored shrines dedicated to the Buddhists and the Jains.[29]

The project of religious construction started (as far as evidence remains) across the Agastya Lake from the Badami fortress. Along the opposite cliff face, Chalukya elites excavated a series of four rock-cut cave temples. They created one shrine for Shiva, two for Vishnu, and one for a Jain Tirthankara. They also added Buddhist sculptures to a naturally occurring cave in between two of the excavated ones. First was Cave 1, dedicated to Shiva, with a monolithic Shiva Linga housed in the sanctum at the rear of the cave. The temple most likely reflects the influential role of the Pashupata order in the Deccan. As at Elephanta and other Pashupata sites, a remarkable sculptural depiction of Shiva dancing figures prominently in this Badami cave temple (**Fig. 56**). Here Shiva steps gracefully with his eighteen arms, enabling him to dance with a wide variety of weapons and other items—trident, axe, drum, and a snake held behind his head. Below, his young son Ganesha tries out a dance step of his own while the bull Nandin watches from behind. In Cave 2, although it is dedicated to Vishnu, there is a small medallion of Lakulisha seated with his four pupils, much as at Jogeshvari. Most likely, artisans had migrated south from Kalachuri areas to work on this new Chalukya project.

By far the most sumptuous of the excavated Badami shrines is Cave 3. Sponsored by Mangalesha, the younger brother of King Kirtivarman (r. 566–592 CE), who was away on a military campaign, this cave was dedicated to Vishnu on 1

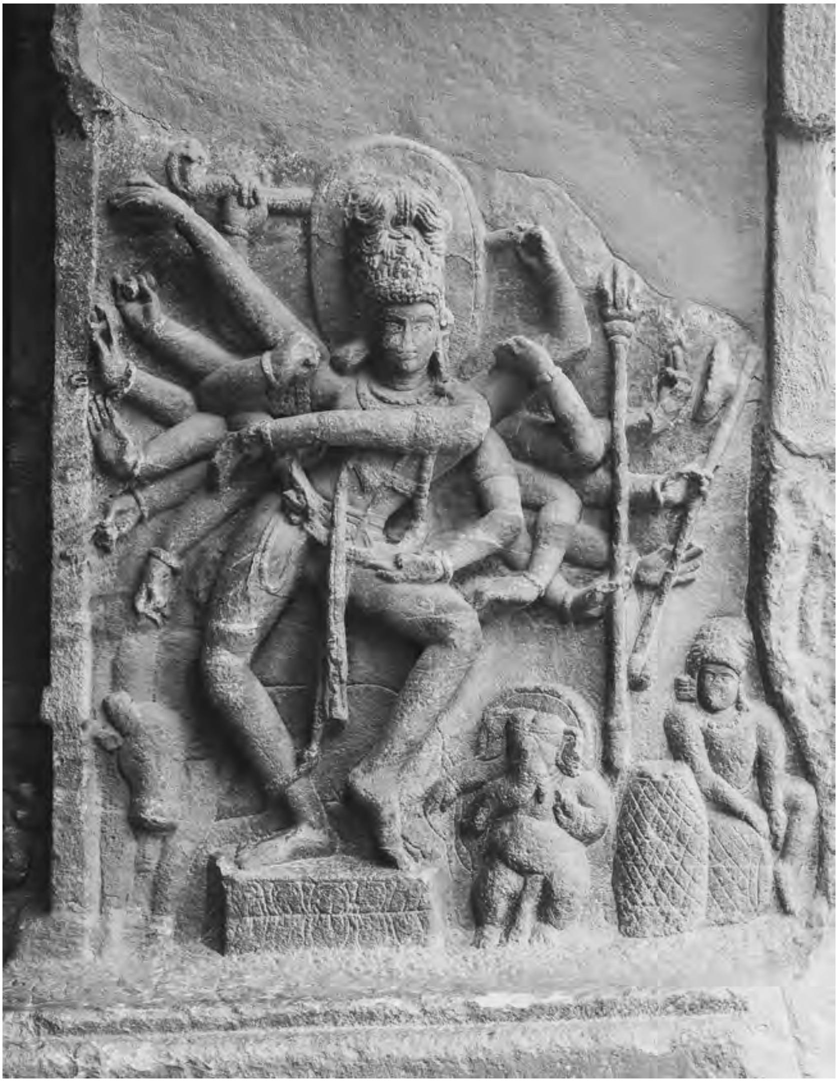


FIGURE 56. Dancing Shiva, relief panel, Cave 1, Badami, Karnataka, ca. 570 CE.

November 578 CE. Mangalesha describes this in a Sanskrit inscription engraved on a pilaster just to the left of an image of Vishnu Varaha, near the entrance to the shrine.[30] He has made a shelter here for Mahavishnu, constructed with wonderful workmanship that surpasses all such places both human and divine. And on an auspicious full-moon day, to mark the ceremonial establishment of the image of Vishnu, he has arranged for the royal revenues from a village to be redirected toward the daily offerings for Vishnu Narayana and to the feeding of sixteen Brahmins. Anything left over after this, he adds, may be used to feed wandering ascetics. Finally, he requests that this pious act of religious donation add to the merit of his older brother Kirtivarman.

This shrine for Mahavishnu has a courtly atmosphere, suited to its royal sponsor. It features a large open courtyard in front, a wide veranda with eight sturdy pillars, and a spacious interior hall—suitable for public ceremonies and performances of courtly dance and drama (**Plate 8**). Inside, the pillars are decorated with profuse jewel designs, and hovering above on brackets are the loving couples, human and divine, who populate romantic *kavya* literature. The original image of Mahavishnu who would have resided in an excavated sanctum at the rear of the cave is long lost, but Vishnu remains multiply present throughout the temple. In large-size relief panels, several of his principal forms and incarnations appear: Narasimha; Vamana the Dwarf growing into high-stepping Trivikrama; Harihara who combines Vishnu and Shiva in a single being; and an eight-armed standing Vishnu. The most impressive of all, whom we might simply call Mahavishnu, sits at the left entryway. Here the more-than-human-scale four-armed god relaxes on a throne formed by the coils of his snake Ananta, who also forms a canopy over Vishnu with his five hoods (**Fig. 57**). With his two upper arms Vishnu holds discus and conch. Like any proper ruler he wears a high crown, and all the bracelets, armlets, necklaces, waistbands, and anklets suitable to his high status. Beside him two female Naginis hold fly-whisks. Seated below to the left is a diminutive Garuda with hands folded in honor, and to the right a small figure of goddess Earth.

Just past Mangalesha's royal cave temple for Vishnu is Cave 4, a smaller Jain excavation. The Jains were active in the western Deccan, especially the Yapaniya group, an offshoot of the Digambaras, which was supportive of temple practices and Jain goddess worship. The Yapaniyas were also sympathetic to female liberation within Jainism. The Kadamba dynasty that preceded the Chalukyas in the area had actively supported this Jain community, and evidently they maintained a strong presence in the Chalukya court.[31] Under Pulakeshin II, the Jain court poet Ravikirti received the high favor of the king and was able to sponsor a large structural temple on a hill overlooking the temple-filled town of Aihole. Ravikirti also composed a lengthy prashasti, dated 634 CE, to celebrate the Chalukya kings and to dedicate the temple to the Jain Tirthankara he calls Jitendra, probably referring to Rishabha, the earliest in the series of twenty-four Tirthankaras.

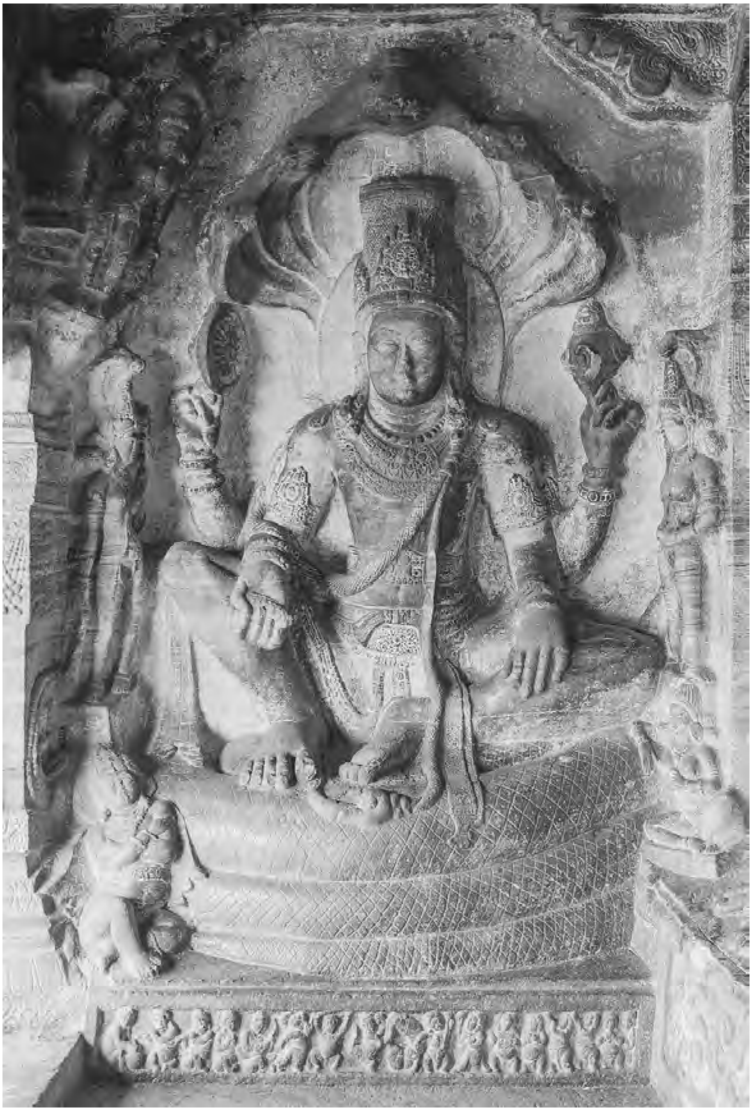


FIGURE 57. Mahavishnu Seated on Ananta, relief panel, Cave 3, Badami, Karnataka, 578 CE.

Victorious is the Lord Jitendra, free of old age, death, and rebirth! The entire world is like an island comprehended within the ocean of his knowledge.

And victorious too, for a long time, is the immeasurable broad ocean of the Chalukya family. In that family are born the gem-like people who adorn the earth's crown.[32]

As a good court poet, Ravikirti goes on to glorify Pulakeshin's conquest of the directions.

Around the beginning of the seventh century, the Chalukyas shifted their architectural orientation. No longer excavating cave temples, they began to sponsor freestanding structural temples of red sandstone in Badami, as well as at the other nearby religious centers of Aihole and Mahakuta. Two of these are inside the fortress area at Badami, a restricted zone meant for the royal circle and military officials. Now these are called "Lower Shivalaya" and "Upper Shivalaya," since Shiva Lingas were later installed in them, but neither was originally a Shaiva temple. Based on the imagery remaining on the outer walls of the Upper Shivalaya, we can be certain it was a Vaishnava shrine. Sculptural reliefs depict Vishnu's incarnations in their moments of victory: the man-lion Narasimha rips open the chest of the demon Hiranyakashipu; Krishna defeats the snake-demon Kaliya; and Krishna holds up Mount Govardhana to protect the cowherds from Indra's deluge. Though much of the original temple has deteriorated over the millennium and a half it has stood at the top of the cliff, it remains the earliest and best preserved example of the Dravida ("southern") style of temple architecture. There are many differences in elements of design between the Dravida and the Nagara ("city") styles, but the most noticeable is the shape of the tower that rises above the sanctum. While the Nagara tower rises in a curvilinear fashion, the Dravida one forms a multistory pyramid superstructure (**Plate 9**). During the first half of the seventh century, the Chalukyas followed the Dravida style exclusively, but they would later explore both primary styles and others as well.

However, in 642 CE, the Chalukya religious building project came to a temporary halt. The Pallavas invaded from the south, defeated the Chalukya forces, and occupied the capital at Badami. Pulakeshin II lost his life in the conflict, and the ruling family appears to have fled in disarray. It would be fourteen years before another Chalukya ruler would proclaim himself king in Badami. When Pulakeshin's son Vikramaditya I (r. 654–671 CE) did restore Chalukya rule in the Badami regions, he sought a new religious orientation.

Lajja Gauri and the Chalukya Restoration

A remarkable and unusual goddess reclines in the Badami Archaeological Museum (**Fig. 58**). She lies on her back, with two legs bent upward and splayed out, as if in a birthing position. Her two arms are at her sides, elbows bent, with half-opened lotus buds held in each hand. She has large firm breasts and a soft roll of flesh at her stomach. Though naked, she is fully adorned with bracelets,

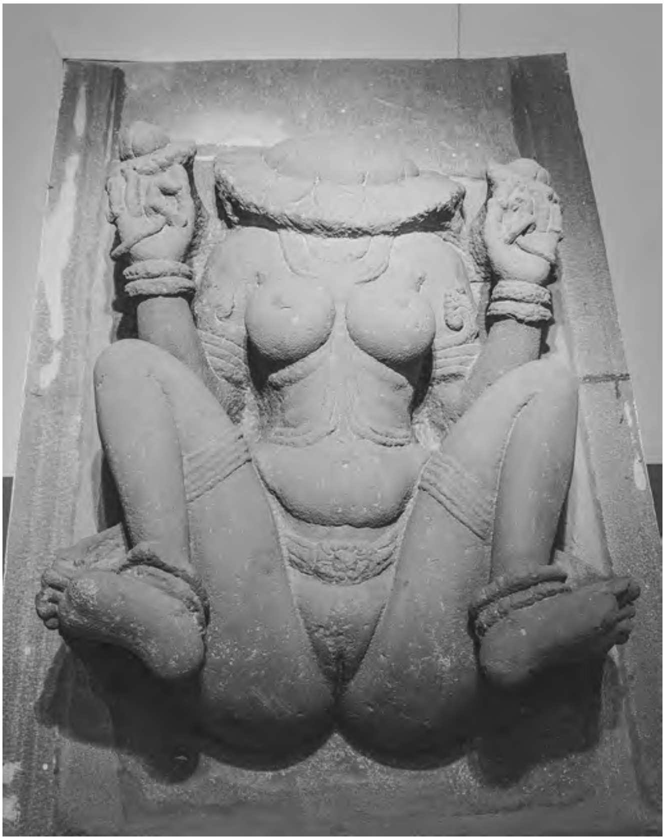


FIGURE 58. Lajja Gauri, Badami Archaeological Museum, Badami, Karnataka, late 7th century CE.

armlets, anklets, necklace, and a decorative belt. For a head, the goddess has a half-opened lotus flower, which tilts outward toward the viewer.

This large reddish sandstone image is over three feet in height, and it shows every sign of careful, expert artistry. Art historian Carol Bolon calls it "a masterpiece of fluid modeling and conscious symbol-making."[33] But who is this goddess? How did she get here? And what is the symbol she is making?

The common name for this goddess is Lajja Gauri. Gauri, the "brilliant one," is a frequent epithet for Shiva's spouse Parvati. Lajja signifies "modesty," so the goddess might be seen as Parvati in her modest form. This particular image was found half-buried near a subshrine of the Naganathakolla temple, a Shaiva shrine built in a forested area outside Badami in the latter part of the seventh century.[34]

But this is not the only such image of Lajja Gauri. There are numerous others, and at least twelve of them are stone sculptures from the Chalukyan territories, dating from the same period.

One of the most striking of these images still resides in her original home. Siddhanakolla is a small pilgrimage spot on a plateau a few miles outside Aihole, where a spring-fed waterfall forms a natural grotto.[35] Inside the little cavern a *svayambhu* Lajja Gauri lies on her back, carved in relief directly from the rock floor. Like the Lajja Gauri image from Naganathakolla, this goddess has a large lotus for a head, and she holds her legs apart and bent. Immediately beside her is a stone Shiva Linga, about a foot high. Near the grotto is a subshrine for the Seven Mother goddesses. Adjacent to these is a Shaiva temple of the late seventh century dedicated to Lakulisha Shiva. This indicates the site originally had a Pashupata Shaiva affiliation.

In the Badami museum, Lajja Gauri remains untouched, thanks to a nearby sign enforced by museum guards, but at Siddhanakolla this goddess still receives worship. Women or unmarried couples visit and make offerings to the goddess by rubbing ghee on her pudendum, which is darkened from the ablutions. The pilgrims are requesting the goddess's aid in becoming pregnant. Near the image are small stones carefully placed in cairns, the physical tokens of hope or of thanks that her worshippers leave behind. I was told that this place is a *devadroni*, a "valley of the gods," a place of natural beauty, outside the temple town of Aihole, where the goddess can work her procreative magic. With the childbirth posture and the lotus head, the iconography of Lajja Gauri certainly revolves around fertility. To her devotees she is not just a symbol. She is a goddess capable of making powerful interventions in the lives of the women or couples who honor her.

These images of Lajja Gauri, dating to the seventh century, and her association with Shiva, also pose a question of religious politics. Were the Chalukya royalty involved in the promotion of the goddess Lajja Gauri? In her comprehensive survey, Carol Bolon finds many examples of the Lajja Gauri type of image, in both terracotta and stone, ranging in scale from inches to life-size, and dating over a number of centuries. But the largest and best-executed stone images of this goddess all come from areas under Chalukya rule, beginning in the late seventh century. They are consistently found adjacent to Shaiva shrines. There appears to have been a dramatic rise in the popularity and importance of Lajja Gauri in this time and place.

After the interregnum caused by the Pallava victory over the Chalukyas and their temporary occupation of Badami, there followed a decade of disarray in the royal Chalukya family. By 654 CE, the son of Pulakeshin II, Vikramaditya, was able to claim that he had recovered the prosperity of his family and that he had returned the properties of gods and Brahmins. With the restoration, the Chalukya ruler also shifted the primary dynastic affiliation from Vishnu to Shiva. In 659 CE, Vikramaditya underwent a Shaiva initiation ceremony, the Shiva-mandala-diksha, under the guidance of his Shaiva preceptor, Sudarshana Acharya. An inscription dated 660 CE records that the king gave extensive lands to the Acharya as an honorarium, and Sudarshana then redistributed these lands to twenty-seven worthy Brahmins.[36] The names of many of these Brahmins point to their affiliation with the Pashupata order of Shaivas.

By the mid-seventh century the Pashupata Shaivas had moved from the ascetic periphery to the courtly center of Indic religious culture. They had come to validate the worldly practices of devotional worship along with the yogic regimen of the renunciatory followers of Shiva. They had established themselves in existing Shiva temple sites and promoted the establishment of new ones. And they had developed a new form of royal ceremonial, based on the Shaiva program of initiation and consecration, that conferred powers onto the recipient. This is the Shiva-mandala-diksha that Sudarshana Acharya performed for Vikramaditya. It could enhance or even replace existing Veda-based royal consecrations like the Rajasuya. The Pashupata move was highly effective. In the view of Alexis Sanderson, "For several centuries after the sixth, it was the principal faith of the elites in large parts of the Indian subcontinent and in both mainland and insular Southeast Asia."[37] Sanderson calls this the "Shaiva Age."

Vikramaditya identifies himself as Parama Maheshvara, the preeminent follower of Shiva Mahadeva. This does not mean that the Chalukya royalty became exclusive in their religious patronage, of course. In accord with the ideal of Dharma-kingship, they condoned and supported multiple religious cultures within their domain. As the laudatory inscription of Vikramaditya's successor claims, Vijayaditya (r. 696–733 CE) "gave refuge to the Vaishnava, Buddhist, and Jain religious orders, and through his own actions of Dharma transformed the whole earth into a place of pilgrimage."[38] He does not need to mention the Shaivas in the list, since he was himself a Parama Maheshvara.

In Shaiva temples of this period, goddesses assumed increasing prominence. In places like Naganathakolla and Siddhanakolla, rural locations a bit away from royal centers, a Shaiva complex would include a primary temple dedicated to Pashupati Shiva and smaller shrines occupied by goddesses, the Seven Mothers and Lajja Gauri. Formerly local goddesses like Lajja Gauri could be given a much broader sphere of activity, universalized through identification with Shiva's consort Parvati. And religious orders like the Pashupatas, formerly concerned with the ascetic practices of renouncers, could extend their mission into more everyday concerns of the local population.

One can envision a division of divine labor here. Shiva would be responsible for the cosmic activities of creation, preservation, and destruction. He would be concerned with the liberation of Shaiva adepts, and through rituals like the Shiva-mandala-diksha, he also granted divine powers to ruling elites. Goddesses like Lajja Gauri would involve themselves in the more immediate, this-worldly concerns of their devotees—health, child-bearing, prosperity. At Siddhanakolla, Lajja Gauri continues to perform this divine work on behalf of female pilgrims to her grotto.

The Pallavas and the Shrines of Mamallapuram

In the early seventh century, the Chalukyas of Badami and the Pallavas of Kanchipuram were locked in a struggle for preeminence in southern India. Under Pulakeshin II, the Chalukyas scored a victory around 630 CE. After overrunning Kanchipuram, the Chalukya armies marched as far south as the Kaveri River, where the Pallava ruler Mahendravarman had created his cave temple for Shiva. But in 642 CE, with assistance from a Sri Lankan prince, the Pallava ruler Narasimhavarman (r. 630–668 CE) struck back. The Pallavas occupied Badami, and Narasimhavarman proclaimed his victory in a permanent stone inscription inside the Chalukyan fortress.

The disaster for the Chalukyas was a great gain for the Pallavas. In his Badami inscription, Narasimhavarman states that he appropriated a pillar of victory from the Chalukyas.[39] Undoubtedly he took a great deal more from them in plundered treasures. Perhaps, too, he returned to the Pallava territories with some of the local artisans and with a plan inspired by the Chalukya temple-construction project he had viewed in Badami and the surrounding temple towns of Aihole and Mahakuta. The Pallavas had already created a few cave temples during the reign of Mahendravarman. For several decades following their victory in 642, however, the Pallava royal family and court elites carried out a great surge of religious building, especially in the port city of Mamallapuram, thirty-five miles east of the capital at Kanchipuram. Mamallapuram was an ancient port, but now it gained a new status as a royal religious center of the most powerful South Indian empire of the time.

The explosion of new work at Mamallapuram took multiple forms. There were new rock-cut cave temples, similar to those at Badami, bearing large sculptural panels of the primary deities of Hindu theism—Vishnu Varaha, Durga Mahishasuramardini, Lakshmi lustrated by elephants, and so on. Unlike the Chalukyas, the Pallavas seem not to have granted any space to the Shramana communities of the Jains or the Buddhists in their religious center.

Pallava artisans also created something unprecedented at Mamallapuram, the "Great Relief." Across two large granite boulders with a narrow fissure in between, sculptors carved an immense relief panel, some eighty-three feet across by thirty-eight feet high. They filled the monumental composition with an imagined world of figures—animals, celestial beings, earthly deities like Nagas, yogis meditating, hunters, sages in their huts, deities, and one small temple. At the center of the sculpture, the fissure allowed a stream of water to flow down from a tank above the boulders. Immediately to the left of the waterfall, the focal point of the composition, a human figure balances on one leg, arms raised above his head, in a posture of yogic austerity. To his right stands a four-armed Shiva holding a trident, with a hand outstretched to grant a boon to the yogi. What is this scene? Who is the ascetic? Some have argued that the scene is a depiction of Arjuna's penance, as told in the *Mahabharata*, when he sought to acquire an especially powerful weapon from Shiva. Others have interpreted the main figure as Bhagiratha, who performed profound self-mortification in order to bring the Ganges River down from heaven onto earth. In this reading of the scene, the water flowing down the fissure becomes a simulacrum of the Ganges, brought to earth now in Mamallapuram. Perhaps, as Michael Rabe has argued, the composition tells both stories simultaneously, an extended *shlesha*, or double entendre.[40] The Great Relief is a remarkable artistic achievement—unique for its time as a public work of sculpture in permanent stone, standing on its own, not tied to any other religious edifice.

Equal to the Bhagiratha-Arjuna sculptural relief in originality are the nine structures in Mamallapuram often called *rathas* (vehicles or chariots). These are monolithic temples carved out of living granite. They are not structural temples built from the ground up, nor are they rock-cut cave temples created by burrowing horizontally into a rock hillside. Rather, they are created by quarrying large boulders or rock hills from the top downward. It is as if workmen would gradually uncover the temples inside the living stone by scooping away all the rock that was not the temple. These are the earliest surviving examples of this method of temple construction in India. It is remarkable also that each of the nine is distinctive in design. The rock architects were imitating existing architectural forms. Here, as archeologist K. R. Srinivasan puts it, "the Pallavas translated into the hard imperishable stone monoliths the various forms of structural *vimana*-temples of

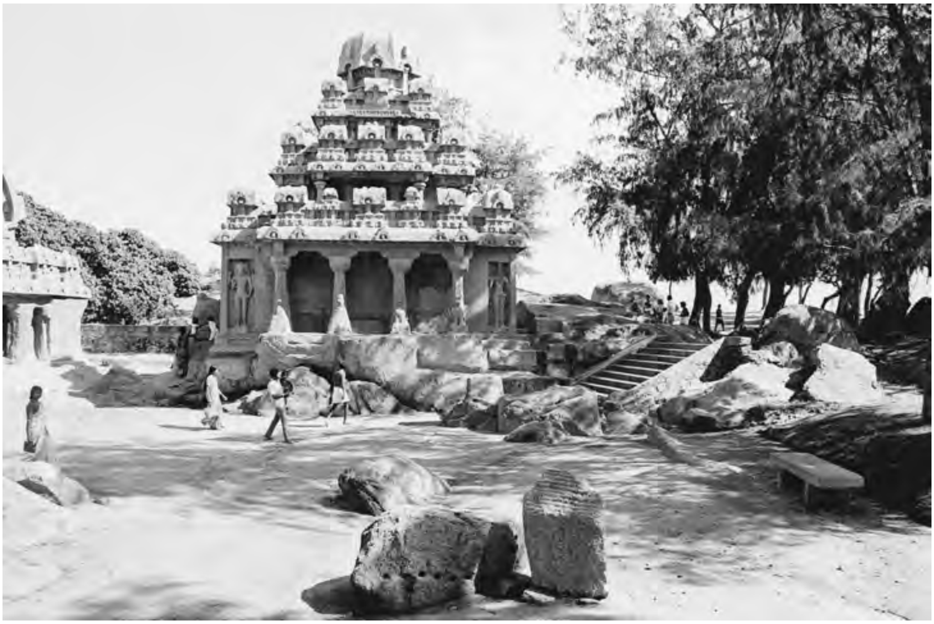


FIGURE 59. Dharmaraja Ratha, Mamallapuram, Tamilnadu, late 7th century CE. Photo by John C. Huntington. Courtesy of the John C. and Susan L. Huntington Photographic Archive of Buddhist and Asian Art.

brick and timber that were prevalent at the commencement of the seventh century."[41] Those seventh-century paradigms in perishable brick or wood have not survived the thirteen centuries since, but their granite imitations have. The monolithic temples would, in turn, serve as models for structural temples in the following centuries.

Most dramatic of these monolithic temples is a group of four set in a line, carved out of what was once a single immense whaleback boulder. The largest of these, the so-called Dharmaraja Ratha (for Yudhishthira, the eldest of the five Pandavas) was created from the highest portion of the granite whale's back (**Fig. 59**). This monolith is a three-story Dravidian temple, thirty-five feet tall, with each story diminishing to form a pyramid profile. At the center of each story is a sanctum, each superimposed above the lower one. The temple is open on all four sides, and it features sculptures of deities on the external walls at each corner. This is a Shiva temple, and most of the relief images are forms of Shiva. We see Shiva dancing, and Shiva catching the Ganges in his hair. We also find forms that illustrate Shiva's unity with other deities: Shiva with Parvati in Ardhanarishvara, and Shiva with Vishnu as Harihara. Other gods are also present, including Vishnu and Brahman.

Joining the divine pantheon of images is the Pallava king Narasimhavarman. He appears on the south wall, a slender two-armed standing figure wearing a tall conical crown, accompanied by an identifying inscription. In fact, the Dharmaraja Ratha is replete with thirty-five one-word Sanskrit inscriptions, each one an individual *biruda* (laudatory title) referring to the king.[42] These royal titles sketch out his many ideal attributes as a Dharma-king. He is attractive: handsome, pleasing to the eyes, handsome as the love god Kama. He is affluent and generous with his wealth: the bearer of money, a cloud showering wealth, the bestower of prosperity. He is valorous and powerful: conqueror in battle, omnipotent, owner of the world. He knows Artha and Kama. He is altogether auspicious. There is no full prashasti of the king here, but the totality of his *birudas*, like a set of keywords, creates a panegyric in its most concise form.

Evidently the Dharmaraja Ratha was not completed during the lifetime of Narasimhavarman, nor was it consecrated for worship then. Later, one of his successors, Parameshvaravarman (r. 672–700 CE), had the third story finished and consecrated as a shrine dedicated to Shiva in his domestic mood, a form known as Somaskanda ("the Lord with Uma and Skanda"). Many manifestations of Shiva emphasize his otherworldly or ascetic qualities, but this one treats him as an accessible family man. Shiva and Parvati sit comfortably together on a throne, with their small son Skanda in between the two. Above them two of Shiva's ganas hold fly-whisks, and the gods Brahman and Vishnu stand to each side. This is the earliest appearance of this iconic composition, which would become the most common sculptural form of Shiva in subsequent Pallava religious art. Art historians have observed that this image, like the Great Relief, holds a double meaning. While referring first to the divine family of Shiva, it also can be seen to represent the Pallava royal family of king, queen, and the young heir apparent.[43]

In the eighth century the Pallavas began to put up structural temples in stone, at Mamallapuram, Kanchipuram, and elsewhere. One of the earliest and most celebrated is the so-called Shore Temple at Mamallapuram, whose slender Dravidian elevation forms a distinct profile visible from both land and sea (**Fig. 60**). The primary shrine here is dedicated to Shiva. In the sanctum, a Shiva Linga is the central icon, and a relief panel of Somaskanda adorns the rear wall.

From the conversion of Mahendravarman, the early Pallava rulers devoted themselves firmly to Shiva. Meanwhile, a religious revival was taking shape throughout the Tamil-speaking regions.

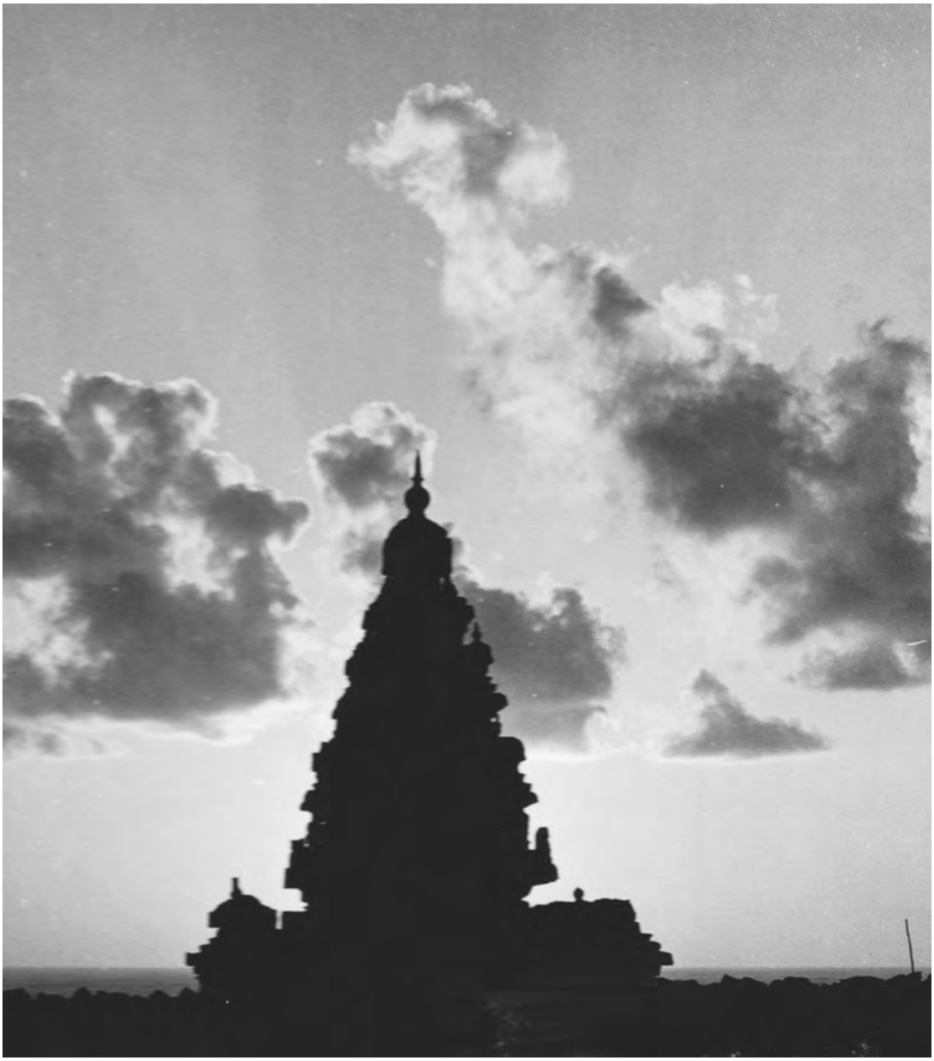


FIGURE 60. Shore Temple of Shiva, Mamallapuram, Tamilnadu, early 8th century CE.

A Devotional Guide for Seeing Shrines

During the time of Mahendravarman and Narasimhavarman, as Pallava royals built new stone homes for the gods to reside, poet-saints traveled throughout Tamilnadu singing hymns of devotion at every holy site along the way. They sang not in Sanskrit, but in the local language of Tamil, which already had a lengthy literary heritage dating back five centuries. Some were worshippers of Shiva, others of Vishnu. Among the Shaiva saints, called *nayanars* ("leaders"), the three most prolific poets had their hymns later collected into a large canon of devotional literature, called the *Tevaram*. The songs are location-specific. Each song relates to a particular shrine, as if the poet composed it right then and there at that place. All in all, these three *nayanars* visited and sang of some 269 holy places in southern India, sketching out a sacred landscape of the Tamil country. More than this, these poems provide guides, in the form of song, for others who would visit the homes of gods. The songs arise out of devotional encounters of poets and god. They exemplify Bhakti and also offer instruction for their Shaiva audience in a particular way of viewing and responding to enshrined deities.[44] To illustrate this devotional guidance, we will unpack one simple song composed by the Shaiva saint Appar at the shrine of Shivapuram, near the Kaveri River.

According to tradition, Appar was a contemporary of Mahendravarman. In fact, he is said to have played a key role in the king's conversion from Jainism to Shaiva devotionalism.[45] Appar was born in a Vellalar family. When his father died, he turned to Jainism and eventually became head of a Digambara Jain monastery. His sister, meanwhile, had become a staunch follower of Shiva. When Appar began to suffer from acute colitis, his sister beseeched Shiva to cure him. Appar visited the local Shaiva shrine and experienced a dramatic conversion. Bursting spontaneously into a song of praise, he was suddenly cured. From that point on, Appar traveled and sang his hymns. Many of these express his regret over the time he wasted as a Jain.[46] Eventually, Jains in the Pallava capital of Kanchipuram got wind of this deserter and his Shaiva evangelism. They persuaded the king to arrest Appar and have him tortured. But as Appar survived every ordeal, the king shifted in his religious persuasion. Abandoning Jainism, he, too, became a devotee of Shiva. Historians identify the king in Appar's hagiography with Mahendravarman.

During his long pilgrimage through southern India, Appar came to the town of Shivapuram and sang to the god Shiva he encountered there.

See the god!
See him who is higher than the gods!
See him who is Sanskrit of the North
and southern Tamil and the four Vedas!
See him who bathes in milk and ghee,
see the Lord, see him who dances, holding fire,
in the wilderness of the burning-ground,

see him who blessed the hunter-saint!
See him who wells up as honey
in the heart-lotus of his lovers!
See him who has the unattainable treasure!
See Shiva! See him who is our treasure
here in Shivapuram![47]

At that time, the temple at Shivapuram would have been a modest structure of perishable materials, not one of the more permanent stone structures that the Pallava rulers were just beginning to create. Of course, the simplicity of the shrine does not detract from the sacrality of Shiva's presence, in the eyes of the devotee. Appar begins with a command: "See the god!" The entire poem remains in the imperative mode. Appar issues a series of commands, addressed to an unspecified audience of bystanders, as if he were urging others with him at the temple to share in his experience. Through the hymn Appar recommends to this audience a series of ways to see the god there.

Most immediately, one can see the god in the form of an icon, in this case the Shiva Linga. Appar and the other Shaiva devotional saints unambiguously insist on the actual presence of the divine within an enshrined icon representing Shiva. That is the accessible manifestation of Shiva in a particular location, as Appar reminds us at the end of the poem, "here in Shivapuram." The Shiva Linga in its shrine is the recipient of daily worship, in which the god "bathes in milk and ghee." The poet acknowledges, but he does not dwell on, the priestly rites of the shrine.

This close encounter with the enshrined Linga, Appar insists, should lead the mind of the devotee beyond that, to broader dimensions of Shiva's being. One should see, in the devotional mind's eye, stories of the god's deeds, known through pan-Indian works like the Puranas and oral retellings. Appar's statement that Shiva is "higher than the gods" might recall to his listeners Shiva's famous flame-linga, the original Linga at the beginning of creation. They would have known the story from works like the *Kurma Purana* and many other versions that circulated during this period. In that primordial form, Shiva is literally higher than the two gods Brahman and Vishnu, and lower as well.

Shiva is known widely as the god "who dances, holding fire, in the wilderness of the burning ground." Shiva's dance figures as a primordial scene in many Puranas and other pan-Indian religious works, and we have seen his dance represented in sculptural form at Elephanta and Badami. It is understood as a dance of cosmic destruction (hence the fire), and also of creation. But it also has specific resonance for a Tamil audience, since Shiva's crematory dance is linked with several specific places in Tamilnadu where Shiva is supposed to have performed this dance, and where he still does so. Most famous among these is the Sabha at Chidambaram, the foremost Shaiva center in Tamilnadu.

Along with these cosmic dimensions, Shiva should also be known for his intimate acts of grace. Reminding his audience to see the god "who blessed the hunter-saint," Appar alludes to a local tale of devotional zeal and divine favor. Kannappar is the chieftain of a hunting tribe, goes the story, an outsider unacquainted with proper temple etiquette. Yet when he chances upon a Shaiva shrine in the wilderness, he immediately becomes a fervent devotee. In other hymns Appar relates what happens next. With his leather sandals in hand, Kannappar approaches the shrine with an offering of meat and bathes the icon with spit from his own mouth. All of these ritual transgressions, however, are trumped by the intensity of his devotion and his willing self-sacrifice. The god's eyes begin to stream blood, and Kannappar plucks out his own eye to offer to Shiva. At this point, Shiva prevents him from any further acts of self-mutilation and grants him grace. In Sekkilar's later telling of the story, Shiva is so impressed by Kannappar's fervor that he asks him to remain forever at his right hand.[48] The story illustrates, in a Shaiva narrative, Krishna's claim in the *Bhagavad Gita* of the overpowering force of Bhakti. This devotional power is available to all, even forest tribesmen like Kannappar.

For the Shaiva poet-saints, Shiva's being reaches far beyond the range of his perceptible icons and his mythical deeds. Even when we cannot see him in palpable form, Shiva is nevertheless present. The poets convey this by embedding Shiva within all the constituents of the world. So in the Shivapuram hymn, Appar reminds his listeners that Shiva can be found both in the pan-Indian Sanskrit of the north and in the local Tamil preferred by the poets. These are not language systems opposed to one another, Appar suggests. Rather, both languages are means by which Shiva becomes present to us, as he does in the four Vedas. Elsewhere Appar identifies Shiva as "standing within" water, fire, earth, and sky, the constituent elements that make up the perceptible world.

To convey Shiva's full multiplicity, Appar uses a rhetoric of ontological shifts. He guides his listener from the specific local enshrined Shiva to stories of Shiva's manifestations to abstract universals, and then back again to the Shiva Linga. This points to the translucence of the icon. The poet instructs the audience to look *at* the form of Shiva immediately before them in Shivapuram and to look *through* it to the broader dimensions of his comprehensive being.

This way of seeing is also an experience. The songs of the Tamil Shaiva poet-saints adopt a personal voice. The poets speak of their own experiences, and they model devotional receptivity for others. And in their devotional palette, love is the dominant emotion. The poets often compare this feeling of love toward Shiva to the inward taste of sweetness found in honey or sugarcane juice. But here, Appar suggests that this sweet savor is not simply a response inside a devotee. The "honey that wells up in the heart-lotus" is also Shiva. The sensation of sweet satisfaction inside that the worshipper gains from seeing the god is itself yet another way that Shiva manifests himself within each person. If Shiva is outside the devotee, in an icon, as an object of love, he is also inside that devotee as the feeling of sweet love that he arouses.

Finally, Appar points to Shiva as the one who holds an "unattainable treasure." The Tamil word *celvam* denotes various kinds of worldly treasures one might hope to obtain—wealth, prosperity, beauty, pleasure, enjoyment. The unattainable treasure might also refer to liberation from bondage, Moksha. For Shaiva theologians, the key to attaining this highest kind of treasure is the grace (*anugraha*) of Shiva. Without that, salvation is not possible. Only Shiva can grant that treasure. But Appar adds that Shiva not only *holds*, but also *is* the treasure. Physical proximity to Shiva through his presence in the Shiva Linga, recognition of the larger dimensions of Shiva's nature, and the love that arises in one's heart seen as an inward manifestation of Shiva all constitute participation in Shiva's manifold being. Appar suggests that this is itself a moment of grace, a taste of liberation. That is the treasure that stands there, visible to all, in Shivapuram.

Devotional poems like those of Appar and the other Shaiva *nayanars*, and likewise those of the Vaishnava *alvars*, sung in the regional language of Tamil, articulated a new mode of religious sensibility. They celebrated the gods Shiva and Vishnu they encountered in the shrines spread throughout southern India. In their celebrations they also modeled ways for other devotees to approach the gods and enter into a kind of communion with them. This marks the beginning of what is often called the "Bhakti movement" in medieval India, though this is better seen as a series of regional Bhakti movements. Poet-saints sing in personal terms, of their own lives and experiences, using local languages rather than pan-Indian Sanskrit. They highlight emotional responses toward their chosen form of god—whether that be Shiva, Vishnu, Krishna, Rama, the Goddess, or some other divinity. Often, but not always, they set themselves apart as critics of other prevailing forms of religious practice.

EPILOGUE

Varieties of Religious Cultures in Early India

IN THIS BOOK WE HAVE listened to the voices and looked at the world-making visions articulated by the religious cultures of early India, over the course of two millennia. We can do this because residues or remnants of those past cultures still exist. They may be verbal texts that have been transmitted, orally and in written form, over many centuries. They may be physical objects small and large—from coins and terracotta figurines up to structural temples and urban landscapes—that have been somehow preserved through time, under or above the ground. We have tried to hear and see them in their own times of creation, speaking out of and to their own particular circumstances, with their own distinctive agendas. We have sought to locate them in dialogue with one another, as they would originally have been, whether sharing, dissenting, or debating one another. I think of this fundamental historical method, following the well-known formulation of R. G. Collingwood, as the "re-enactment in the historian's mind of the thought whose history he is studying."[1]

But that reenactment of past intentionalities—our historical reconstruction *of* the past—obviously does not take place *in* the past. Collingwood insists on the difference between, in his example, Admiral Nelson's thinking at Trafalgar and the historian's rethinking of his thought. To Nelson, it was a "present thought"; to the historian it is "a past thought living in the present."[2] The latter is "encapsulated." It takes place on a plane different from the former thought embodied in Nelson's deliberation. Collingwood in his study at Oxford need not confront the existential circumstances that provoked Nelson on the deck of the *Victory*. Yet they share the ability to think it, as a human capacity. The past may be a foreign country, as historians say, but they speak in languages we can learn to comprehend. Collingwood takes this a step further. "If he is able to understand, by rethinking them, the thoughts of a great many different kinds of people," he goes on, "it follows that he must be a great many kinds of man. He must be, in fact, a microcosm of all the history he can know."[3]

Only ninety years separated Nelson from Collingwood, but there is no statute of limitations on historical thinking. We can go to Bodh Gaya in modern Bihar and sit under the extending branches of the Bodhi tree, said to be a descendant of the tree where the Buddha Shakyamuni sat on the night of his enlightenment twenty-six centuries ago. We can rethink those thoughts of that night, thanks to the dedicated transmission by his followers. We rethink them, as Collingwood say, in an encapsulated way. Our circumstances differ. But the Buddha's thoughts are intelligible to us, humans in the twenty-first century, whether or not we share Buddhist convictions. If we follow Collingwood's next step, it is attractive to think of oneself as a "microcosm" who includes the Buddha's enlightening thoughts as part of the history one knows.

The past lives not just in reenacted verbal thought, but in material forms that also reflect their own purposes. At the foot of the Bodhi tree is the stone platform constructed by the Mauryan emperor Ashoka in the third century BCE, as a token of his veneration toward the Buddha. Often the material forms are relocated and highly transmuted. So the lion capital and Dharma wheel, also made in the time of Ashoka and excavated during the British colonial period, now appear carefully protected in the Sarnath Archaeological Museum. They also appear, reproduced in a two-dimensional design, on countless millions of coins, bills, and documents, as the official insignia of the modern nation-state of India. So, too, the Yakshis and other earthly deities of early times may speak to a contemporary cosmopolitan artist like Mrinalini Mukherjee, and reappear not as a stone icon of worship, but in the form of dyed hemp sculpture, as an art object in that citadel of modernity, New York's Museum of Modern Art.

Remnants of the past may be protected by modern institutions, by museums or the Archaeological Survey of India. They can be designated, even, as part of humanity's world heritage. Among the places in South Asia selected by UNESCO as World Heritage Sites are Bhimbetka, Mohenjo-daro, Bodh Gaya, Sanchi, Taxila, Ajanta, Elephanta, Nalanda, and Mamallapuram. Even then, they might be contested, retaining multiple identities for different communities. Since the time of Marshall and Lake in the early twentieth century, the pillar standing in old Vidisha (modern Besnagar) is known as the Heliodorus pillar, a remnant of the Shunga Era, under the official protection of the Archaeological Survey. But some local residents, retaining an identity that predated the British archeological intervention, still regard it as Khamba Baba, Lord Pillar.

Looking back from the twenty-first century, a millennium and a half distant from the late seventh century CE, where we end this narrative, what are the most pertinent features of this history of religious cultures? In this churning of early Indian religious history, what has surfaced? I have tried to stress throughout this study the changes within Indian religions over time. Churning the ocean of religion was no onetime event, but an unfolding over time. There is no single story here, with a clear line of development to an end point. Rather, in this history I have outlined a multiplicity of religious perspectives and practices. In closing, I highlight a few of what I will call (with a nod to William James) varieties of religious cultures in early India.

Sacrificial religion: From very early times, groups of religious specialists who came to call themselves Brahmins recited and transmitted a collection of texts called the Vedas, viewed by many Hindus now as containing the foundation of their religious order. Communities of Smarta Brahmins, supported on Brahmin settlements of tax-free lands, organized their lives around recitation and explication of these orally transmitted works. While the early religious culture that centered around large public Vedic sacrifice was no longer central, the intellectual disciplines that grew out of Vedic inquiry—such as grammar, astronomy, hermeneutics, and Dharma—continued to develop. From the metaphysical speculations and salvific orientation of the Upanishads, the final works in the Vedic canon, philosophical schools called the Vedanta debated and established multiple philosophical positions: monist, dualist, and several shades in between. Philosophical debates crossed boundaries of religious cultures, and they involved Buddhists and Jains in disputes over epistemology, ontology, and the nature of salvation.

Renunciatory religion: During the period of urbanization in northern India, Shramana seekers and teachers renounced worldly lives in pursuit of a higher transformative goal. The most successful of these teachers, notably the Buddha Shakyamuni and Mahavira the Jain Tirthankara, claimed to have attained enlightenment and liberation from the cycle of transmigration. They attracted followers who carefully remembered and passed on their teachings, which over time grew into large canonical libraries of texts. These teachings, which they identified as Dharma, offered an analysis of worldly existence and suffering, and also promoted means to alleviate and extinguish that suffering. The methods of spiritual advancement involved varied yogic disciplines of self-restraint and meditation.

Disciplinary communities: The followers of these Shramana teachers also formed monastic communities, for both male monks and female nuns, which organized the collective lives of the most dedicated Buddhists and Jains. Such self-disciplining groups were instrumental in transmitting teachings, educating new members, and maintaining a shared commitment to practice. These new religions articulated broad ethical teachings intended for everyone, renouncers and lay followers alike, and created public-facing devotional practices around stupas and shrines. Smarta Brahmins also organized themselves around a shared commitment to domestic ritual practices, transmission of Vedic texts, and an austere style of life also identified as Dharma.

Imperial religion: During Mauryan rule in the third century BCE, the emperor Ashoka set out Dharma as a universal ethical principle, a meta-religion standing above the various religious communities within the empire. His powerful example served as a model for subsequent rulers, but it could be taken in different directions. Buddhist rulers, in India and elsewhere, stressed Ashoka's support of the Buddhist monastic community and the Buddhist orientation of his proclamations, as they understood Dharma-kingship within a Buddhist framework. The Sanskrit epics outlined an alternative form of Dharma-kingship, which selectively drew on Ashoka's ethical principles while also maintaining a loyalty to aspects of the Vedic legacy. Aspiring emperors, starting with the Shaka ruler Rudradaman, had their conquests celebrated and themselves praised as Dharma-kings in Sanskrit inscriptional prashastis. The ideal of a monarch shaped by the ethics of Dharma—however that crucial term was defined—was in ongoing tension with the unitary authority enjoyed by the monarch in pursuit of Artha.

Missionary Buddhism: The Buddha meant his teachings to be universal in scope, and Ashoka levied the power of his rule to spread aspects of Buddhist culture throughout the Mauryan dominion and beyond. This missionary dimension of Buddhism continued during the Kushana Era, and Buddhist monks took advantage of extensive trade routes in the early centuries CE to transform Buddhism into a pan-Asian religious formation. This involved the transfer of all three jewels of the religious culture—Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha—into new regions. Transfer across linguistic and cultural boundaries required enormous intellectual labor and often led to modifications or altogether new forms of doctrine and practice. In the seventh century the Buddhist institutions of northern India still retained the charisma of the founder, and monks often traveled from far outposts to visit the original Buddhist homeland and to study at prestigious *mahaviharas*, or great monasteries. The monastic center of Nalanda acted during this time as an institute of advanced study for the world Buddhist community.

Popular religion: On the peripheries of the pan-Indian religious formations, at all times, there have been domestic and local religious cultures that we refer to as popular (*laukika*) religions. These included beliefs and practices centered on earthly deities closely associated with household life or the natural landscape: Yakshas, Yakshis, Nagas, little goddesses, and many other categories of powerful, often dangerous, beings. Such deities were often associated with the dangers of everyday life and were propitiated for their powers to alleviate misfortune and bring worldly benefits. The popular deities and their religious communities were never isolated from their surroundings. Earthly deities often reappear, incorporated into subordinate roles, in the narratives of the pan-Indian religions, and can be viewed also in their visual representations.

Theistic religion: The Sanskrit epics initiated the development of a new theistic religious orientation, distinct from both the Vedas and the non-theistic Shramana communities. The epics accepted a broad pantheon of deities drawn from multiple sources, along with a rich legacy of stories about the doings of these gods. But they also introduced and promoted a new singular High God, one who could take on multiple manifestations in the world while also remaining transcendent. This is the foundation of Hindu theism. In the epics the central Supreme Deity is identified as Vishnu Narayana, who appears in the epic narratives in the human forms of Rama and Krishna. Those who are devoted to that god are known as Bhagavatas. But later, in the Puranas and other religious texts, other groups would proclaim other deities as the highest one of all. The Pashupata school claimed Shiva, Lord of Creatures, as the Supreme. Others assigned that ultimate position to a singular Great Goddess, Mahadevi, who manifests herself in a multitude of goddesses. In each case other deities were recognized but made subordinate to the one divine figure deemed comprehensive and supreme.

Visual religion: In the early centuries CE, Indian religions took a visual turn. In the city of Mathura and elsewhere, artisans began to fabricate large religious images in permanent stone. These works of sculpture represent a variety of divine characters: earthly deities like Yakshas and Yakshis, Shramana founders like the Buddha and Mahavira, and gods of the emerging Hindu pantheon such as Vishnu and Durga. Religious institutions like stupas and shrines came to be elaborately adorned with visual imagery. And more consequentially, stone images were consecrated as icons meant to receive honor and worship. Among the Hindu theists, these icons came to be animated by the divine presence of the deities they represented. Priests set out new ritual procedures for the consecration and proper veneration of the image deities. At the same time, seeing gods in their full splendor, through visions, became a key feature in religious narrative. New forms of theistic Yoga incorporated visualization of gods as part of this disciplinary practice.

Temple religion: Such images required proper homes. Modest shrines for earthly deities and temples for deities constructed in perishable materials must have dotted the religious landscape for a long time, but from around 500 CE divine figures began to receive more permanent structures. These might be cave temples burrowed into rock hillsides or the monolithic *rathas* of Mamallapuram. Most often, however, these new durable temples were structural temples built in stone. By the seventh century, imperial rulers like the Chalukyas and Pallavas began to patronize these homes for the gods. In the eighth century these dynasties would create genuine imperial-scale temples in or near their capital cities. Later dynasties like the Rashtrakutas, the Cholas, and the Chandellas (to name just a few) would expand the size and scale of the temples and also widen the ritual and public practices centered around these temples. At the same time these royal temples went up, innumerable smaller regional and local shrines were constructed throughout India.

Devotional religion: Alongside the growing scale of temple Hinduism, with its elite patronage and ritual complexification, others claimed that emotional enthusiasm toward one's chosen deity played a more crucial role in religious veneration. The ideological foundations of Hindu Bhakti reach back to the epic literature of the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Harivamsha*, but we have seen that the devotional saints of Tamilnadu took this sensibility in a new direction. By the seventh century, groups of devotees to both Shiva and Vishnu traveled the Tamil region and composed new hymns in the regional language. Among these devotional saints, notably, were female poets and devotees from groups generally excluded from elite religious institutions, such as the hunter devotee Kannappar. In the following centuries, similar Bhakti movements would spring up in other regions of India and employ their own regional languages to celebrate the regional forms of the deities in the sacred sites of their regions. Collectively, the Bhakti hymns and songs produced in these various vernaculars constitute one of the greatest canons of religious literature of India.

From the perspective of the twenty-first century, we can glimpse the legacy of all these historical developments in contemporary South Asian religions. Many have also spread well beyond their initial Indic homeland. But I do not wish to imply that any of these varieties of religious cultures exist now as they did in the past. Religious changes and innovations are characteristic of every historical period, as this narrative history has shown, and so too they have been in the centuries since 700 CE.

In this history we have seen that questioning and debate are central features in Indian religions of the past, and this is no less true today. Indeed, issues pertaining to religion are matters of urgent public inquiry in contemporary South Asia. In an era of Hindu nationalism in India, how does one define Hinduism? Who gets to do the defining? Should Hinduism be defined at all? Should we speak instead of "Hinduisms" in the plural (as other scholars of religion sometimes speak of "Judaisms" or "Islams") to acknowledge the diverse strands that have gone into this modern religious formation? Just how relevant are the normative works of the past—Vedas, Sanskrit epics, Dharmashastras, Puranas, and the like—to present-day concerns? How should Hindus relate themselves to other religious communities in India? How clear are the boundaries between them? What are the proper roles for religious groups and institutions in the modern secular state of India? Should Indians understand their national identity in terms of a dominant Hindu heritage, or view Hinduism as one among many threads in the cultural fabric of India?

In the modern world-system, these religious issues are not just regional of parochial ones. In an interconnected world, the religious politics of a world power like India have repercussions across the globe. It is a time of unprecedented movements of peoples and religious communities throughout the world. How may Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism best be reformulated to meet the new social settings and needs of Indian immigrants in the United States, United Kingdom, and around the world? So, too, with the global reach of religious ideas and practices first promulgated in early India. To what extent are the new Western forms of postural yoga or mindfulness meditation, for example, grounded in their early Indic foundations? What can we all learn from an engagement with the religious ideas and practices formulated in ancient India? "We study history," Collingwood reminds us, "in order to see more clearly into the situation in which we are called to act."[4] My hope is that this narrative history of early Indian religious cultures provides both a perspective on some of these questions and an invitation to explore this history further.

NOTES

Introduction

1. Ram 1.44.14-27. Other versions consulted include the *Mahabharata* (1.15-17) and the *Vishnu Purana* (1.9).

2. Smith 1998: 281.

3. James 1982: 26.

4. Smith 1998: 281–282.

5. Inden 2000: 3. The "we" in this passage refers to participants in an occasional colloquium Inden organized at the University of Chicago in the 1980s, on "Texts and Knowledge of South Asia." As a graduate student I participated in some of the colloquium meetings, and it continues to inform my own perspective four decades later.

6. Collingwood 1994: 213.

7. Collingwood 1978: 96. Original writing of Collingwood's *Autobiography* dates to 1938.

8. Childe 1962: 9. See also Collingwood 1978: 128 on the purposes of archeological remains.

9. Laine 2014: 123.

10. Twain 1904: 2. 83.

11. Pew Research Center, "The Global Religious Landscape," December 18, 2012.

Chapter 1: The Living Landscape of India

1. *Ramayana* 5.1.108-112.

2. The story of Ganga's descent to earth is told often, with significant variations, in many Indic texts. This version is drawn from *Mahabharata* 3.104-108. See also Eck 1996 for a broader overview of ways that the Ganges has been viewed in Indian culture.

3. For an accessible account of plate tectonics, I have relied on Van Andel 1994: 105–172. The author traces the set of hypotheses and discoveries by which plate tectonics became established as a new paleo-geological paradigm in the late 1960s.

4. Van Andel 1994: 166.

5. Van Andel 1994: 129.

6. Ludden 2002: 15. See also Davis 2009: 1–5.

7. Bana, in Vidyakara, *Subhashitaratnakosa*, no. 194. This anthology of individual "well-spoken" verses was compiled by a Bengali Buddhist connoisseur of poetry in the eleventh century. For a full range of ancient Indic poetry celebrating the six seasons, see Selby 2003.

8. Gadgil and Guha 1992 provides an introduction to the ecological history of South Asia. A recent and excellent overview is Fisher 2018.

9. *Mahabharata* 1: 214–225. Gadgil and Guha 1992 suggest the connection of this epic story with the historical clearing of the Ganges forests.

10. Ludden 1999: 19.

11. Ludden 1999: 19.

12. Ramanujan 1985: 241. For a full mapping of the five landscapes, see Zvelebil 1973: 100.

13. See Dundas 1992: 187–194 and Granoff 1994 on Jain pilgrimage.

14. Hiltebeitel 2016 discusses the multiple tirtha narratives in the *Mahabharata*. Bhardwaj 1973: 44 maps the pilgrimage sites in the *Mahabharata*. For a general overview of tirthas in Hinduism, see Eck 1981.

15. Tuan 1974: 93.

16. Tuan 1974: 32.

17. For this section, I use the excellent translation of Leonard Nathan 1976.

18. Nathan 1976: 94.

Chapter 2: Indo-Aryans and the Vision of the *Rig Veda* Poets (1300–1000 BCE)

1. Here I use the translation of Jamison and Brereton (2014), a full translation of the *Rig Veda*. For other hymns, I have sometimes selected translations of O'Flaherty 1981 and Maurer 1986, on the basis of accessibility. Both O'Flaherty and Maurer offer accessible translations of select hymns, each about one-tenth of the full text. I am grateful to Jarrod Whitaker for his reading and comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.

2. Smith 1906. Carlleyle never published his findings during his own lifetime, but eventually his notes found their way into print.

3. For an overview of the history and scholarship on Indian rock painting, see Neumayer 1983. A recent full survey of prehistoric rock painting may be found in Part II of Sundara 2021. For a general treatment of European Paleolithic painting, see Clottes 2016.

4. On Bhimbetka, see Brooks and Wakankar 1976 and Mathpal 1984.

5. Gadgil and Guha 1992: 17.

6. On Mehrgarh archeological work, see Jarrige and Meadow 1980 and Jarrige 1993.

7. See Jarrige 1988.

8. Marshall 1924: 528.

9. Childe 1951: 87.

10. Kenoyer 1998: 40–43. For a recent accessible survey of Indus Valley research, see Robinson 2015.

11. Kenoyer 1998: 81.

12. Jones 1788: 421

13. Jones 1788: 422–423.

14. The literature on the Indo-Europeans is immense. For excellent brief summaries of IE protoculture, see Mallory 1989 and Fortson 2004. A more recent comprehensive work is Anthony 2015.

15. The *Avesta* is the collection of Zoroastrian sacred books, codified in the Sassanid period of the third through seventh centuries CE. The oldest section of the text, the *Gathas*, are

linguistically close to the *Rig Veda*. Other portions of the *Avesta* date from c. 800 BCE to 200 CE. See Insler 1975.

16. Allchin 1995: 53

17. Elizarenkova 1995: 9.

18. Kuiper 1983. See also Heesterman 1957.

19. Mahoney 1998: 67–68.

20. Elizarenkova 1995: 10

21. Jamison 1991: 17.

22. RV 10.101.3, trans Jamison & Brereton, 2014: 1560.

23. An excellent gateway to the topic of Soma, with bibliography, is Brereton 2005. On its identification, the best-known work is Wasson 1971. For a comprehensive history of the quest for Soma and a critical review of its many hypotheses, see Houben 2003.

Chapter 3: The World of Sacrifice (1000–600 BCE)

1. See Erdosy 1995 for a survey of archeology of this period.

2. Thapar 1984. See also Thapar 2002: 98–136.

3. Witzel 1995: 2.

4. Jamison & Brereton 2014: 10–13 discuss the structure of the *Rig Veda Samhita*.

5. W. C. Smith 1993: 18. In his wide treatment of "scripture" as a religious category, Smith also observes that "scripture" and related terms refer to something "written down" (1993: 7). But since there is no suitable term for the scripture-like properties of orally transmitted holy works like the Vedas, I use the term "oral scripture." This applies also to later, post-Vedic works in India.

6. Witzel 1997: 265.

7. Barthes 1972: 142.

8. J. Z. Smith 1982: 48.

9. The classic scholarly work on the Brahmanas as interpretive commentary is Lévi 1898.

10. On the Brahmin shakhas, see Renou 1947 and Witzel 1997.

11. Weber 1855. Full translation by Eggeling 1882–1900, in five volumes.

12. B. K. Smith 1985: 76.

13. Collingwood 2014: 14. For a succinct overview of the Vedangas, see B. K. Smith 2005.

14. Filliozat 1992: 20.

15. *Jyotisha Vedanga*, Rk 36, quoted in Pingree 1981: 8.

16. Kane 1962–75, 2: 983

17. Hubert and Mauss 1964: 13.

18. Heesterman 1957 provides a comprehensive summary and commentary on the Rajasuya.

19. Heesterman 1957: 120.

20. Inden 2006: 91.

21. Hazra 1955 argues that the Ashvamedha was the ritual arena in which major post-Vedic literary and religious genres took shape, such as the royal genealogies, the bardic epics, and the cosmological and moral works of the Puranas.

22. Jamison 1996: 39.

23. Jamison 1996: 53.

24. Jamison 1996: 68.

25. *Tandya Mahabrahmana* 6.1.11, quoted in Kane 1962–75, 2: 34, fn 77.

26. On recitation methods, see Filliozat 1992: 13–19. The same pedagogical methods, still prevalent among some twentieth-century Vedic Brahmin communities, are described ethnographically in Staal 1961. For valuable reflections on oral recitation as a social practice and the "training and sustenance of a mneumonic elite," see Guha 2019: 30–34.

27. *Tantavartika* on *Purvamimamsa Sutra* 1.3.7, quoted in Rocher 1994.

28. Fisher 2018: 45.

29. Biardeau 1976: 16.

30. Biardeau 1976: 13.

Chapter 4: A New Urban Culture and Renunciatory Religion (600–300 BCE)

1. Hesse composed *Siddhartha* between 1919–1921, and the German original was published in 1922. I have used the recent English translation by Susan Bernofsky (Modern Library, 2006). I am grateful to Caroline Walker Bynum for detailed comments on an early draft of this chapter.

2. Hesse 2006: 5

3. Hesse 2006: 114.

4. Hesse 1974, from his essay "My Faith," (1931). In this later essay Hesse recognizes that the book's final doctrine of love is not Indian, but Christian and Protestant.

5. Erdosy 1995.

6. Agrawala 1953: 194–205.

7. Agrawala 1953: 229–235.

8. Wagle 1968: 156.

9. Archeologists calculate that it would have taken a workforce of 10,262 persons working for 150 days to build Kaushambi's defensive walls, and for the still larger fortifications at Ujjayini a workforce of 34,666 individuals employed for 150 days would have been required (Allchin 1995: 70).

10. Ghosh 1973: 68.

11. Agrawala 1955: 311; Allchin 1995: 336.

12. Olivelle 1993: 57.

13. Ghosh 1973: 53–54.

14. Olivelle 1998: 7.

15. Brereton 1990: 117.

16. Brereton 1990: 118.

17. Dumont 1980: 275.

18. Heesterman 1985: 26–44; Samuel 1993.

19. Jain 1988.

20. "Samannaphala Sutta" is the second work in the *Digha Nikaya* collection.

21. Basham 1951 offers the authoritative survey of the Ajivakas.

22. On the life of Mahavira, see Jaini 1979: 1–41.

23. Jacobi 1884: 85.

24. Dundas 1992: 28–29. For a detailed historical examination of the relationship of Mahavira and Parshva, see Dundas 2020. On the relationship of the Jains and Ajivakas, see Balcerowicz 2020.

25. Jacobi 1884: 36. See Jaini 2000 on the Jain ethos of *ahimsa*.

26. Jacobi 1895: 80–81.

27. Jacobi 1895: 50–56.

28. Jacobi 1895: 51.

29. Jacobi 1895: 55.

30. There has been lengthy debate among scholars over dating the Buddha Shakyamuni. Estimates range from the "long chronology" of the Sri Lankan chronicles, which place him 624–544 BCE, to the "short chronology" derived from some Indian works, placing his dates at 448–368 BCE. See Bechert 1991–97 for an extensive discussion. Here I adopt a common (but by no means universal) scholarly consensus of 480–400 BCE.

31. *Majjhima Nikāya* 36. See Nanamoli and Bodhi 1995: 332–343. This is one of the earliest tellings of the biography of the Buddha. See Nanamoli 1972 for a convenient assembly of Pali canon texts to reconstruct the life of the Buddha.

Chapter 5: The Mauryan Era: Religious Cultures of Empire (321–187 BCE)

1. Rongxi 2017: 172.

2. Bagehot 1963, *The English Constitution*, in *The Works of Walter Bagehot*, vol. 4, p. 54. Italics in original.

3. Bagehot 1963, *English Constitution*, vol. 4, pp. 56–57. Italics in original.

4. For useful general works on the Achaemenids, see Briant 2002 and Garthwaite 2005.

5. Maqsh-e Rostam inscription, quoted in Choksy 2005.

6. The "Cyrus Cylinder" was excavated in 1879, and in 1880 it entered the collection of the British Museum in London—reminding us again of a later world-conquering empire and its appropriations. See the British Museum website, "The Cyrus Cylinder," which includes two translations of the inscription.

7. Book of Ezra 1.2, New Revised Standard Version.

8. Schmidt 1953: 63.

9. Root 1979: 1.

10. Plutarch, "Alexander" 37, in Waterfield 2016: 44.

11. Herodotus 4.40, in Waterfield 1998: 247–248.

12. Plutarch, "Alexander" 62, in Waterfield 2016: 65.

13. Trautmann 2015: 190–196 carefully reconsiders the number and role of war elephants in this encounter.

14. Herodotus, *Histories*, 3.102-105, in Waterfield 1998: 212–213.

15. Herodotus, *Histories*, 7.152, in Waterfield 1998: 457.

16. Romm 2010. Arrian also inserts into this episode a reference to Alexander's encounter with the Cynic teacher Diogenes of Sinope, a similarly subversive perspective. The naked philosophers episode is also narrated, with different details, in the widely circulated "Alexander Romance" (Stoneman 1991: 131–133). A much more detailed treatment of Greek responses to India, from Alexander's campaign on, is Stoneman 2020.

17. Arrian, *Anabasis* 7.1.6, in Romm 2010: 274.

18. See Stoneman 1995 for a careful review of the evidence concerning the gymnosophists and a reconsideration of their identity.

19. For a recent overview of the literature on Megasthenes, see Roller 2016.

20. Trautmann 1971: 10–67 carefully reviews the many later Indic versions (from Pali, Jain, Kashmiri, and Sanskrit dramatic sources) of the story of Chanakya and Chandragupta, as well as fragments found in classical Greek and Latin sources. He identifies a "primitive version" (which he calls the *Cāṇakya-Candragupta-Kathā*) that is grounded, at least in part, on a historical Chanakya.

21. Sternbach 1963. For his critical edition of the *Cānakya-rāja-nīti*, Sternbach collected and studied 159 editions of Chanakya sayings, altogether containing 2,438 different maxims attributed to the Brahmin adviser.

22. Olivelle 2013 translation. Earlier translation by Kangle 1963. Convenient selections with valuable introduction is McClish & Olivelle 2012. Identification of Kautilya with Chanakya may date to the Gupta period and to the Sanskrit drama *Mudrarakshasa* of Vishakhadatta. On the large literature pertaining to *Arthashastra*, see Scharfe 1993.

23. Thapar 2000.

24. Jha 1998: 185.

25. Laine 2014: 7.

26. Ashoka's inscriptions have been collected and edited multiple times. Here I use the edition of D. C. Sircar, *Select Inscriptions Bearing on Indian History and Civilization* (1965), abbreviated SI. For accessible translations of Ashoka's proclamations (often misleadingly labeled "edicts"), see Sircar 1957 and Nikam & McKeon 1958. A more recent overview of Ashokan inscriptions is Allchin and Norman 1985. For a recent state of the field set of essays, see Olivelle, Leoshko, and Ray 2012.

27. Olivelle 2017 offers a clear overview of the semantic history of *dharma*.

28. *Anguttara nikaya* 3.2.2.5.66.

29. Ashoka mentions five Yona (Greek) kings by name: Antiochus II Theos of Syria, Ptolemy II Philadelphia of Egypt, Antigonus Gonatas of Macedonia, Magas of Cyrene, and Alexander of Epirus. This passage has been crucial for establishing the dating of Ashoka's reign and it also points to the long range of Mauryan diplomatic relations.

30. Laine 2014: 27.

31. Strong 1977.

32. The Theravada *Mahaparinibbana Sutta* is the sixteenth *sutra* in the *Digha Nikaya*. See Walshe 2012: 231–277.

33. See Scheible 2016: 41 on *samvega*.

34. Strong 2004: 98–123 provides a valuable guide to the MPNS narrative of the Buddha's death and cremation.

35. For summaries of the Sinha and Roy archeological report of 1969, see Gupta 1980: 248–251 and Härtel 1991: 68–69.

36. Kanakamuni is a Pratyeka Buddha, a "solitary Buddha" who became enlightened through his own effort, without instruction from a teaching Buddha. Unlike teaching Buddhas like Shakyamuni, Pratyeka Buddhas do not instruct others about their experiences.

37. Mukhopadhyaya 193 and Strong 1983. The text was composed in several stages and completed probably in the second century CE in Mathura, imperial capital of the Kushanas. The first Chinese translation was made in 300 CE.

38. *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence*, directed by John Ford (1962).

39. Josh 2012:394. On the national emblem, see Sivaramamurti 1966.

40. Nehru 1946: 49.

41. Nehru 1946: 50.

42. Nehru 1946: 52.

43. Nehru 1946: 20.

44. *Constituent Assembly Debates, Official Reports* (from July 1947), quoted in Josh 2012: 403.

Chapter 6: Disciplinary Communities and Religious Quests

1. *Therigatha* 122–126, in Hallisey 2015: 71. In his notes, Hallisey also supplies biographical detail based on the later commentary of Dhammapala. I am grateful to Bradley Clough for valuable comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.

2. The dating of these poems, as with most early Indic texts, has been disputed. In the best available effort, K. R. Norman concludes that they were originally uttered over a period of time from the time of the Buddha to the late Mauryan period (cited in Hallisey 2015: xxxiii fn 4).

3. Jacobi 1895: 202–210. Dundas suggests dating this text to the second century BCE. Originally the Jains termed this text the "Veda." On the role of vows in the Jain community overall, see Cort 2001: 24–30.

4. Huntington 1985: 48–50 and Falk 2006: 255–282. Falk suggests an Achaemenid inspiration for this Mauryan innovation.

5. Wagle 1968: 18–19 points to the frequent mention of Brahmin villages in the early Buddhist texts.

6. Olivelle 2018: 20.

7. On Brahmin consecrations, see Pandey 1969. Also valuable for its treatment of consecrations, relying on later Bengali materials, is Inden and Nicholas 1977.

8. For a brief treatment of *stridharma* in the Dharma literature, see Jamison 2018.

9. Van Gennep 1960.

10. Lubin 2018: 113.

11. Jamison 2018: 126.

12. Olivelle 2018b offers a brief treatment, from a Dharmashastra perspective.

13. Valmiki *Ramayana*, 3: 1–11.

14. *Mahabharata*, 1: 62–69. The description of Kanva's ashram is in chapter 64. Vaishampayana tells the story of Duhshanta and Shakuntala to King Janamejaya as genealogical background of the Bharata lineage, to which the protagonists of the epic, and Janamejaya as well, belong. The account in the MBh served as the basis for the famous Sanskrit drama *Abhijnana Sakuntala* of the Gupta Era poet Kalidasa, discussed in chapter 12.

15. I am using the Pali *Vinaya* of the Theravada school. Different Buddhist schools maintained their own *Vinaya* collections, though there are not great differences among them. The Theravada Pali *Vinaya* is the only full *Vinaya* preserved in its Indic original language. Others are available in Chinese and Tibetan translations. For an overview of the *Vinaya Pitaka* in early Buddhism, see Lamotte 1988: 165–179.

16. The Tirthikas are identified only as pravrajikas, renouncers, here, a Shramana school.

17. On oral transmission in early Buddhism, see Wynne 2004, Skilling 2009, and Clough 2018. The oral texts of the Pali canon were first written down in the first century BCE, as related in the *Mahavamsa* (33: 100–101).

18. On early Buddhist monastic specialization, see Lamotte 1988: 149–150, Schopen 1997: 30–31, and Clough 2018.

19. This episode appears with slight variations in the *Vinaya* codes of all the early schools and has been widely discussed by scholars of Buddhism. See Lamotte 1988: 552–555, giving versions of the episode found in six *Vinaya* recensions.

20. Hallisey 2015: 223. The songs of the *Therigatha* are classified in later tradition as *udana*. They do not enjoy the same authority within the community as the words of the Buddha Shakyamuni. But as words that contain both knowledge and euphoria, they are worthy of determined memorization and transmission by generations of Buddhists. Most likely they were handed down within the female order, prior to the use of writing. The "three things" (Pali *tevijja*, Sanskrit *trividya*) are the ability to know one's past lives, the ability to know the rebirth of other beings, and the ability to know one's own moral corruptions have been eliminated.

21. Jaini dates the Digambara-Shvetambara split to the time of Chandragupta Maurya and Bhadrabahu, said to be the ruler's Jain preceptor. Jain debates over the issue of female salvation continued into medieval times. See Jaini 1991 and Dundas 1992: 48–52.

22. For discussions of this key narrative, see Hüsken 2000 and Wijayaratna 2010: 9–20. For a general overview of scholarship concerning women in early Theravad Buddhism, see Walters 1994.

Chapter 7: Popular Religious Cultures during the Shunga Era (200 BCE–0 CE)

1. Chandra 1966 provides a description of Vidisha Yaksha and Yakshi, near the time of their finds. On the finding of Kubera Yaksha and other icons on the riverbanks of Vidisha, see Dass and Willis 2002: 30. The authors report that the image we call Kubera was known to the locals as Dana Baba, whose name points to his benevolent, gift-giving character. I am grateful to Akira Shimada for careful reading and comments on this chapter. Materials in this chapter were presented at the New York Conference for Asian Studies, the University of Wisconsin Conference on South Asia, and at the Department of History, University of Delhi. I am grateful to the audiences at these venues for comments and suggestions.

2. Coomaraswamy 1928: 29.

3. The Nagauri Naga was first described by Marshall and Foucher 1982, Pl. 125 a, c. On the Gulgaon snake deities, see Williams 1976 and Shaw 2007. The Gulgaon Naga is now in the Sanchi Archeological Museum, while the Nagini was evidently stolen.

4. For classic accounts, see Srinivas 1952, Marriott 1955, and Singer 1964.

5. Cowell and Thomas 1993: 193.

6. DeCaroli 2004: 14, citing Patanjali on Panini 6.3.26. DeCaroli carefully reviews the scholarly terms used for *laukika* deities and chooses the general term "spirit deity."

7. *Mahamayuri* was translated into Chinese by the fourth century CE. See the pioneering study of Lévi 1915, and Misra 1981: 161–171 for a tabulation of Yakshas and their sites.

8. See Coomaraswamy 1928: 17–24, for a hypothetical reconstruction of Yaksha shrines. He also includes lengthy quotes from the Jain *Aupapatika Sutra*, pp. 19–21.

9. Modi 1932: 343–44 and 14–15.

10. Davis 2005: 4379.

11. Coomaraswamy 1928: 36.

12. Cort 2002: 62. For other efforts to provide a suitably complex, polythetic, or historicized definition of *bhakti*, see Prentiss 1999 and Francis and Schmid 2014.

13. Gopal 1959: 475–476.

14. Useful points of departure for Indian terracotta figurines are two exhibition catalogues, Poster 1986 and Pal 1987. See Haque 2001 and Ahuja 2018: 252–256 on the terracottas of Chandraketugarh.

15. Ahuja 2005: 345.

16. Cunningham visited these sites in the 1850s, and his report (1854) remains a valuable work (Cunningham 1966). Cunningham also discusses his search for Buddhist reliquaries at each location, by "sinking shafts" into the stupas. His finds are now in the British Museum, well catalogued by Willis 2000. Of the five sites, Sanchi has been fully studied, and Satdhara has received some archeological attention. The other three locations remain largely unstudied.

17. Marshall and Foucher 1982, in three volumes, provides a massive survey of Sanchi remains. Marshall 1918: 87–88 observes that Sanchi was filled with a multitude of small votive stupas, but these were mostly swept away in a British cleanup of the site in 1881–82. Gregory Schopen 1997: 122 sees this as a pattern found in old Buddhist sacred sites in South Asia: a large central structure, associated with the physical body of the Buddha, surrounded by a large number of smaller structures, mostly containing anonymous ashes, bones, or other relics. This proliferation of secondary structures does not follow any discernible plan or order. Guha-Thakurta 2010 surveys the excavations and reconstructions of Sanchi during the colonial era.

18. See Brekke 2007 for the complex saga of the relics and their return to Sanchi.

19. The stump of Ashoka's pillar at Sanchi remains intact. Its original lion capital is preserved in the Sanchi Site Museum, as is a portion of the Mauryan period parasol. On Ashoka's connection with the Vidisha area, Buddhist sources like the *Mahavamsa* (13.8-11) claim that Ashoka served as governor of the Ujjayini region prior to becoming ruler. During this time, it is said, he married Devi, daughter of a Vidisha banker. One of the children of Ashoka and Devi, Mahendra, was sent to Sri Lanka as a Buddhist missionary.

20. Mitra 1971: 67.

21. Marshall and Foucher 1982: 36.

22. Willis 2000: 21–23. See also Shaw 2000: 28, which points to the "inter-visibility" of these linked Hemavata sites surrounding Vidisha.

23. Schopen 1988. Schopen cites Brown 1981: 16–18 on "two-tiered" models of religion.

24. Majumdar 1982 provides text and introduction to the corpus of Sanchi inscriptions. Among numerous social historical studies of Sanchi inscriptions, I have found the following valuable: Thapar 1992, Dehejia 1992, Singh 1996, and Roy 2010. Schopen 2004 addresses the question of why these inscriptions exist in the first place.

25. Singh 1996: 11.

26. Schopen 1991 argues forcefully against a text-based vision of monastic poverty, citing inscriptions from Sanchi and other centers to substantiate his point. This scholarly predilection to prioritize written sources, he asserts, is a "Protestant presupposition" imported into the study of Buddhism.

27. Becker 2015: 25. Becker's discussion of meta-stupas is based on a study of the sculpture at Amaravati in southern India. The Amaravati slabs are somewhat later chronologically than the Sanchi gateways and more detailed in their treatment of stupa veneration.

28. Rotman 2009. *Divyavadana* is a compilation of didactic Indian Buddhist stories, probably put in order around 200–350 CE in northwest India, by the Mulasarvastivada school.

29. Rotman 2009: 65.

30. For detailed treatment and abundant illustration of the role of popular religious cultures within early Buddhist art, see the catalog for the "Tree and Serpent" exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in Guy 2023.

31. Cunningham 1880. On Cunningham's career as military engineer and field archeologist, see Chakrabarti 1999: 48–83 and Guha-Thakurta 2004: 27–41.

32. Marshall 1909: 1053–1056. Bhandarkar 1920 reported that during a 1913 visit it was still in worship, under the supervision of a third-generation priestly lineage.

33. Bisschop and Cecil 2019.

34. Marshall 1909 provides an account of the inscription's recovery and the first publication of the text. Recent authoritative editions of the inscription are Sircar 1965: 88–89 and Salomon 1998: 266–67.

35. V. S. Agrawala, quoted in Irwin 1974: 12. On the early Bhagavata order, see also Härtel 1987.

36. Already in Cunningham's time the capital had been dislocated from the pillar. Dass 2002–3 identifies the remnant of that original pillar capital, now in the Gwalior Museum. It was originally kept in Besnagar site museum and transferred to Gwalior in 1927–28.

37. M. D. Khare and his team carried out excavations near the Heliodorus pillar in the 1960s and 1970s. The reports are in the Indian Archaeology Annual Reviews of 1963–64, 1964–65, 1965–66, 1975–76, and 1976–77. See Irwin 1974 for a discussion of the shrine finds.

38. Metropolitan Museum of Art 2019–2020. See also Davis 2020 on the Met Breuer exhibition of Mukherjee's work.

39. Jhaveri 2019: 30.

40. Jhaveri 2019: 40.

41. Ahuja 2019: 100.

Chapter 8: The Sanskrit Epics: Imagined Empires of the Hindus

1. *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (3rd edition) (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1992), 617. I thank John S. Hawley and Arvind Sethi for valuable comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.

2. See Quint 1993: 8 on the "politicization of the epic" completed in Virgil's *Aeneid* (roughly contemporary with, or a bit later than, the Sanskrit epics), and thereafter an inspiration for future dynastic rulers and a model for epic composition.

3. For an excellent bibliographic point of departure into the vast ocean of these debates and other *Mahabharata* scholarship, see Sullivan 2016. Key recent scholarly discussion of *Mahabharata* textual history are Hiltebeitel 2001 and Fitzgerald 2004.

4. Ghoshal 1959: 157.

5. Fitzgerald 2004: 54.

6. Booth 1983.. See Hiltebeitel 2001: 32–91 for a more detailed treatment of Vyasa's multiple interventions in the *Mahabharata* narrative.

7. Vaidya, *Ramayana*, vol. 1, p. 29 app. 154*, lines 7–8. This well-known verse appears in many manuscripts, but it was omitted from the critical edition.

8. See Assmann 2006: 1–30 on cultural memory.

9. Edgerton 1938: 262. See Hiltebeitel 2001: 177–181 on Jarasandha and Ashoka.

10. Fitzgerald 1983: 619.

11. Charvaka is identified in the narration as a demon Rakshasa and a friend of Duryodhana, who has disguised himself as a Brahmin renouncer to injure the Pandavas. It is not a coincidence that Charvaka is also the name of a materialist, anti-theistic philosopher and his school of thought.

12. Ghoshal 1959: 209.

13. Much of the discussion of the *Ramayana* here is adopted from my publication, *Global India circa 100 CE* (Davis 2009: 45–57).

14. Parasher 1991: 76. Parasher provides the most comprehensive and historically sensitive study of the term *mleccha* in early Indian discourse. See also Thapar 1971.

15. Jha 1974 traces the history of the Nishadas. See Beteille 1980 and Guha 2021 for a brief overview of the study of "tribals" in South Asia. I presented talks on the epic stories of Nishadas at Haverford College, Middlebury College, and the annual conference of the American Academy of Religion. I thank those audiences for comments and suggestions.

16. On forest people and elephants, the key source is Trautmann 2015.

17. MBh 1.123.1-39.

18. Kosambi 1975: 313. See also Kosambi 1965: 166–176 and Schwartzberg 1992: 164 on Brahmin pioneers.

19. Goldman and Goldman 1996: 66.

20. Goldman 1984: 28. Goldman 1984: 26–27 gives references to some of this scholarship. On the persistence of the equation of Indian tribals with monkeys, see also Lutgendorf 2007.

21. Kosambi 1965: 171.

22. Pollock 1991: 15–54 provides a substantial review of the literature on "divine kingship" in South Asia and a persuasive argument starting from *Ramayana*.

23. See Thapar 1991. For a compelling sketch of this multiplicity, see Ramanujan 1991. Important collections that explore the full Rama-katha tradition may be found in Raghavan 1980, Richman 1991, and Richman 2001. The *Mahabharata* has a similar history of retellings: see Hawley and Pillai 2021.

24. MBh 3.258-275. Translators of both *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* discuss the relation between Markandeya's brief account and Valmiki's lengthy epic: Van Buitenen 1975: 207–214, Goldman 1984: 33–39.

25. "Dasaratha Jataka," no. 461, in *The Jataka*, vol. 4. On this telling in relation to the Rama-katha, see Gombrich 1985 and Reynolds 1991.

26. This is the first of numerous Jain retellings of the Rama story. See Kulkarni 1990 and Clines 2022.

27. Desai 1970: 5.

28. Lutgendorf 1995: 217. See Lutgendorf 1990 for an more extensive examination of the television series *Ramayan*. Thapar 1989 and Rajagopal 2001 discuss its social and political impact.

29. See Pollock 1993 on *Ramayana* and dominant elites.

30. Narayana Rao 1991: 114.

Chapter 9: The Kushana Era and Pan-Asian Buddhism (0 CE–300 CE)

1. Luders 1961 no. 97. I am grateful to Bradley Clough and Todd Lewis for careful readings and valuable suggestions on this chapter.

2. There has been a long debate over the dates of Kanishka and other Kushana rulers. I follow here the dating of Falk 2001, which represents a current scholarly consensus.

3. Glover 1989: 12. See Frank 1996 for an argument to extend the "world system" model to premodern periods, such as the early centuries C.E.

4. Benjamin 2018 is the main source for this section. See also Benjamin 2006 on the Yuezhi.

5. Qian 1993: 129.

6. Benjamin 2018: 1.

7. Huntington 1985: 126–130 summarizes the Mat excavation.

8. Rosenfield 1967: 70.

9. Behrendt 2007. The inscription is in Sircar 1965: 147.

10. Rosenfield 1967: 70.

11. Hocart 1970: 89.

12. On the Mathura religious landscape during the Kushana period, see Gupta 2009 and Srinivasan 2015.

13. Legge 1965: 33–34.

14. Marshall 1909 discusses Spooner's excavation. Dobbins 1968 summarizes the scholarship on the reliquary casket and its inscription.

15. On Gandhara stupa forms, see Behrendt 2007.

16. Junagadh Rock Inscription of Rudradaman I, text in Sircar 1965: 175–180. The inscription was first published by James Prinsep in 1838, and it was the subject of much subsequent scholarly discussion. See Kielhorn 1905–06: 36–49.

17. Pollock 2006: 69.

18. Ali 2004: 83.

19. Pollock 2006: 197.

20. Pollock 2006: 72.

21. On developments in Buddha biography leading up to *Buddhacharita*, see Walters 1997.

22. Kent 1982 argues that Ashvaghosha's account of Arada presents a form of early Samkhya philosophy. Samkhya was a developing school of metaphysics distinct from both Veda-Upanishad and Buddhist metaphysics, as will be discussed in chapter 11.

23. DV 8.1-13.

24. Heirman and Bumbacher 2007.

25. On the DV and the MVa in their relation to politics of the broader Buddhist community, see Walters 2000. Scheible 2016 provides an insightful recent study of the *Mahavamsa* in terms of its rhetorical aims. The *Dipavamsa* is often taken as a clumsier, less successful precursor to MVa, but the two works focus on different events: DV devotes greatest attention to the mission of Ashoka's children; MVa provides a lengthy epic of King Duttagamini, who receives only cursory notice in the DV. Walters 2000: 114 notes the probable authorship of DV by Sri Lankan nuns.

26. Ch'en 1964: 29–30, Zurcher 2007: 22. This section draws on Davis 2009: 22–25.

27. Zurcher 1991 and Zurcher 2007: 31. On the similar later translational method of Dharmaraksha in the third century, see Boucher 1998.

28. Among numerous treatments of these cultural and doctrinal negotiations, see Zurcher 2007, Teiser 2007, and Gernet 1996: 215.

29. Williams 1989: 24.

30. *Saddharma Pundarika Sutra*, commonly the *Lotus Sutra*, was composed in stages, from the first century BCE to the third century CE. It was first translated into Chinese in the third century CE. See Hurvitz's 1982 translation of Kumarajiva's fourth-century Chinese translation, the best-known version. For a general overview, see Williams 1989: 141–166. For the fascinating history of the reception of the text, Lopez 2016.

31. Williams 1989: 141.

32. On the modern history of Bodh Gaya, see especially Geary 2017. Other recent studies useful for the history of this place are Guy 1991, Kinnard 1998, Asher 2012, and Leoshko 2012.

33. Yun-Hua 1966.

34. Guy 1991: 356, quoted from Roerich 1959: 63.

35. Cunningham 1961: 30.

36. Cunningham 1961: 31.

37. Arnold 1896: 309. On Arnold's career, see Ramesh 2021.

38. Arnold 1896: 310.

Chapter 10: Visual Religion: Icons, Worship, and Devotion

1. Oertel 1908 provides the first account of these archeological remains. Key to my discussion is Schopen 1988. For the umbrella shaft inscription, see Salomon 1998: 270–272.

2. On these inscribed images, see Bloch 1981: 179–182 and Goswami 1984: 210–212. The Shravasti statue is now in the Indian Museum, Kolkata.

3. Schopen 1988: 248.

4. Quintanilla 2007: xliv. Quintanilla's careful chronological study of all Mathura stone sculpture for the 150 BCE–100 CE period serves as a primary source for many of the images discussed in this chapter. Other valuable works on Mathura of this period include Singh 2004, Cort 2010, and the collection of articles on Mathura edited by Doris Meth Srinivasan (1989).

5. Cunningham 1885: 40.

6. My translation is based on Luders's reconstruction of the partially effaced Brahmi inscription. See Luders 1961: 175–179 for a full discussion.

7. On the Yaksha Manibhadra, see Misra 1981: 80–85 and Quintanilla 2007: 26–32.

8. Buhler 1892: 390.

9. Jaini 1995; Quintanilla 2007: 250–252.

10. Quintanilla 2009: 116.

11. Dundas 2009: 23.

12. On general features of Jain Tirthankaras, see Cort 2010 and Quintanilla 2009.

13. Shimada 2006 and Shimada 2013 provide the fullest accounts of the stages of construction at Amaravati.

14. DeCaroli 2015: 35. DeCaroli's work carefully traces this broad debate within Buddhist works of the period.

15. Legge 1965: 57, as reported by Faxian. A similar tradition developed around another original Buddha image, the "Udayana Buddha" commissioned by King Udayana of Vatsa. This story circulated widely among East Asian Buddhist communities.

16. Coomaraswamy 1927.

17. Nehru 1989: xvii.

18. Viennot 1956: 368.

19. Srinivasan 1997.

20. On Vaishnava images of Kushana Era Mathura, see Srinivasan 1989: 383–392 and Srinivasan 2011.

21. Babb 1996. See also Cort 2010. This is the official Jain position, but Cort (2010: 63) also notes that, in devotional practice, many Jains do accept some notion of a Jina's presence within its image.

22. Wolterstorff 2015: 132.

23. Wolterstorff 2015: 140. Wolterstorff develops the notion of "fittingness" more fully in an earlier publication, Wolterstorff 1980: 96–121.

24. Einoo 2005a, 2005b on the "Grihyaparishishta level" of texts.

25. Inden 1992: 573. On this "bitter feud" within the Brahmin class, see also Von Steitencron 1977. On Smarta Brahmin opposition to the worship of images, see Sontheimer 1964, Davis 2001, and Colas 2004.

26. Cort 2010: 49.

27. Cort 2002 discusses Jain *bhakti*. See also Bailey 2016 on Buddhist *bhakti*. Coomaraswamy 1928 makes the case for the Yaksha cult as the original form of *bhakti* in Indian religious culture.

28. I follow Ingalls 1968 in seeing HV as a Kushana Era work from the Mathura area. On the HV and Vaishnava incarnational theory, see Davis 2022.

29. See Davis 2015 for a brief account of the eventful afterlife of the *Bhagavad Gita* as an independently circulating work in India and throughout the world.

30. Van Buitenen 1981: 5.

31. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna generally stresses intellectual recognition, intention, and participation as the Yoga of Bhakti. Hardy (1983: 26–29) correctly observes the predominantly "intellectual" tenor of Bhakti in the *Gita* and contrasts this with the "emotional" form of Bhakti that comes to be pronounced in the later Krishna tradition.

32. Beyer 1977: 337; Laine 1989.

33. The Larger Sukhavativyuha Sutra is translated by Muller 1894: 2.1-75. The Sanskrit text was translated into Chinese by Sanghavarman in 252 CE.

34. *Amitayurbuddha Anusmriti Sutra*, translated by Takakusu 1894. The work was translated into Chinese in the early fifth century, but no Indic source has yet been located. The original may have come from Central Asia or from Kashmir.

35. Eck 1985: 10.

36. Reynolds 1858: 454–455.

Chapter 11: The Four Human Aims: Guides for the Good Life

1. See Pollock 1985 on the genre of *shastra* within Indian intellectual history.

2. Collingwood 2014: 4.

3. Tubb and Boose 2007: 1.

4. McClish and Olivelle 2012: xxxvii.

5. Doniger and Kakar 2002: liii. The translators survey the history of Western translations and reception of the work in their introduction, pp. l–lviii.

6. Agganna Sutta in *Digha Nikaya*. Walsh 1995: 407–415.

7. Doniger & Kakar 2002: xxxvi.

8. KS 1.3.15. See Chakladar 1929: 161–171 on the various sports and festivities of the *nagaraka*. Ali 2004: 76–77 provides a Table 2.1 of the sixty-four arts.

9. Doniger & Kakar 2002: 5, fn 11.

10. Some scholars place the *Arthashastra* as a Mauryan period text, but the careful analysis of Trautmann 1971, McClish and Olivelle 2012, and Olivelle 2013 place the text later. Olivelle (2013: 6–25) outlines three stages of composition, starting with the mid-first century BCE and ending in the Kushana Era, 175–300 CE.

11. See McClish and Olivelle 2012 for a useful selection and an excellent introduction to the work.

12. In his evaluation of authorship, Olivelle (2013: 29–31) postulates that a final redaction of the *Arthashastra* was carried out by an editor versed in the Dharmashastra literature, who may have added passages that advance the roles of Vedic Brahmins into the text.

13. In the introduction to his translation, Olivelle (2004: xxiii) estimates the date of the MDhSh to the second century CE. Note that most of Manu's treatise is spoken by his pupil Bhrigu, much as Vaishampayana speaks the *Mahabharata* composed by his teacher Vyasa. For simplicity I will treat the contents of this treatise as Manu's direct instruction.

14. Aktor 2018 provides a careful account of the theoretical and historical social order in Dharmashastra literature. See also Smith 1994: 317–319 on the classificatory logic of Manu's social ordering.

15. See Davis 2018: 348–352 on Manu and other Dharmashastra "iconophobes."

16. *Yajnavalkya Dharmashastra* 1.4-5. See Olivelle 2019: 3. Many of the twenty listed are no longer extant. Fuller accounts of the full history of Dharmashastra as an intellectual discipline in India are Lingat 1973, Olivelle and Davis 2018, and the five-volume magnum opus of P. V. Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra* (1962–1975).

17. For a starting point on that story, see Trautmann 1997.

18. Eliade 1969: 3. The French original, *Le Yoga. Immortalité et Liberté*, was published in 1954. For more recent overviews of Yoga traditions, see White 2012 and Mallinson and Singleton 2017.

19. Tatia 1994. Padmanabh Jaini (1979: 81–82) notes that Umasvati's work has the rare distinction of being accepted as authoritative by both Shvetambara and Digambara Jains. Writing in the Kushana Era, Umasvati's choice to write in Sanskrit indicates his interest in presenting the Jain viewpoint to a broader educated audience.

20. *Tattvartha Sutra* 9.27, in Tatia 1994.

21. Uskokov 2022: 2. Uskokov provides a comprehensive and accessible account of the *Brahmasutras*, along with the commentarial traditions that grew up around the text. I rely principally on his account in this section.

22. Uskokov 2022: 74.

23. On the historical issues of Patanjali's work, see Maas 2013.

24. Miller 1996: 1.

Chapter 12: The Gupta Era: Religious Cultures of Court and Beyond (300–500 CE)

1. Mitra 1963 sets out the basic identification of all the figures. There is abundant art historical literature on this imposing work of sculpture, starting with Cunningham's tour in the 1870s. See Cunningham 1880: 46–56.

2. VP 1.4. The story is also narrated in other sources and subsequent Puranas, with many variations.

3. See Asher 1983 for a discussion of this political-iconographical allegory.

4. Kumar 2021 offers a useful overview of research on the Hunas of South Asia. On the Eran Varaha, see Becker 2010.

5. Rongxi 2002: 175.

6. Rongxi 2002: 175.

7. Coomaraswamy 1985: 71 (original publication 1927). See Brown 2019 for a detailed examination of the long legacy of Gupta period art as "classical."

8. Bhandarkar 1981: 203–220. See also Sircar, *Select Inscriptions*, pp. 262–268. The "Allahabad pillar," erected by Ashoka Maurya originally in Kaushambi, was moved to the Allahabad fort, probably by the Mughal emperor Akbar.

9. Bhandarkar 1981: 12–ff provides a careful and detailed analysis of these modes of conquest. On the notion of "imperial formation," see Inden 2000: 24.

10. For key works on classical and medieval imperial formations in India, see Inden 1982 and 2006.

11. Ali 2004 offers a full and broad exploration of Indian royal court culture as it developed and was represented in classical and early medieval South Asia.

12. ASh 2.1.7-12. On the practice of Brahmin land grants, see Lubin 2018. Lubin notes shifts in recipients of land grants over time: earliest are made in favor of Buddhist monks, then from Gupta times more often to Vedic Brahmins. Still later, it becomes more common to issue grants in support of temples.

13. YDhSh 1.314-316, 319. See Olivelle 2019: 103.

14. See Basak 1982 and 1983 for early Gupta period copper-plate grants to Smarta Brahmin recipients.

15. The "Mehrauli Iron Pillar Inscription of Chandra," in Bhandarkar 1981: 257–259. Most scholars assume the "Chandra" in this inscription refers to Chandragupta II. The famous iron pillar is now in Mehrauli, a southern part of Delhi, located within the Qutb Minar complex. It was transported there in the thirteenth century by Iltutmish. According to Balasubramanian and Dass 2004, the iron pillar originally stood in Udayagiri, at the base of the water-course, in front of the cave where Virasena's inscription is found.

16. Willis 2009: 10–30 describes the specifics of Udayagiri as an astronomical site. Willis offers the fullest and most persuasive account of Udayagiri as a Gupta religious center.

17. Williams 1982: 46–47 and others have interpreted this set of figures according to the account of the *Devimahatmya*, a later Puranic work. See the discussion of the DM in the next chapter.

18. Bhandarkar 1981: 255–257.

19. Miller 1984: 13.

20. NSh 1.3-4. Scholars generally attribute the NSh to the Gupta Era.

21. On the Indra flag festival in Indian texts, including the NSh, and in modern Nepal, see Baltutis 2023.

22. Thapar 1999: 46. Thapar's study of the Shakuntala story compares both versions in detail, as historical documents, and also looks at later renderings of the main story in literature and film.

23. MBh 1.62-69.

24. Miller 1984: 112.

25. Miller 1984: 113.

26. Miller 1984: 14.

27. For Kumarajiva, I have relied on Ch'en 1965: 81–84 and Todaro 1987

28. Yun-hua 1966.

29. I am grateful to Hannibal Taubes for his assistance with Faxian's Chinese terminology here.

30. Rongxi 2002: 173.

31. Rongxi 2002: 203.

Chapter 13: The Puranas: Varieties of Hindu Theism

1. For a comprehensive overview of scholarship on the Puranas, see Rocher 1986.

2. VP 3.17-18. For a study of the Buddha-avatara in multiple Purana accounts, see Clough 2021. Jaini 1977 examines Purana efforts to incorporate the Jain Tirthankara Rishabha as an avatara of Vishnu.

3. See Bhattacharjee 1926 and Nilakantan 1989 for general overviews of this subgenre. In his treatment of the *Ganesha Gita* within the *Ganesha Purana*, Bailey (1995) describes the Gita as a "literary unit" within Puranic discourse.

4. The *Ishvara Gita* is in *Kurma Purana* 2.1–11. For a full translation of the *Ishvara Gita* with a valuable introduction, see Nicholson 2014.

5. The phrase "modifying addendum" comes from conversations with Norvin Hein, for which I am grateful. See Hein 1983.

6. Kinsley 1986 provides an accessible historical overview of individual Hindu goddesses. Cort 1987 is a useful summary of Jain goddess imagery. On Mahayana Buddhist goddesses, see Langberg 2021.

7. Ramanujan 1999. See the useful table comparing the two types on p. 498.

8. For the full *Markandeya Purana*, see Pargiter 1969. *Markandeya Purana* is a relatively early Purana, and composition of the *Devi Mahatmya* may date to the fifth or sixth century CE. It subsequently circulated widely, independent of the Purana. See Rocher 1986: 195–196.

9. Jaini 1993. Text and translation of the *Adi Purana* are in Nagar 2011. For this section, I have relied on Jaini's essay, as well as Cort 1993 and Clines 2022. I am grateful to Ralph Strohl, a fellow graduate student at the University of Chicago, for many conversations about Jinasena's *Adi Purana* while he was researching his dissertation on this text.

10. Jaini 1993: 234.

Chapter 14: Homes for Gods (460 CE–700 CE)

1. Hultzsch 1892. See also the discussion in Rabe 1995.

2. On Indic religious cultures as they were transformed in Southeast Asia (unfortunately beyond the geographical reach of this study), see the catalog and the essays for the exhibition "Lost Kingdoms" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in Guy 2014.

3. Rongxi 1996: 131. For a general account of Harsha and his religious activities, see Tripathi 1942.

4. Rongxi 1996: 128.

5. Inscription in Panchamukhi 1985: 4–9. *Matsya Purana* (275: 1–29) outlines the procedures for the Golden Embryo ceremony. The twelfth-century Dharmashastra author Lakshmidhara quotes the MP for its treatment of the Golden Embryo, and for a large part of the sixteen mahadanas, in his *Krityakalpataru*. For translation, see Brick 2015: 99–102. On the significance of the Golden Embryo, see Inden 2006.

6. "Aihole Inscription of Pulikesin II," verse 32, in Kielhorn 1981 and Padigar 2010: 37–40.

7. Bronner 2012: 75–78, drawing from Dandin's *Avantisundarikatha*.

8. Spink 2005. I accept here Spink's "short chronology" for the construction of Ajanta second-phase caves in about two decades. According to the "long chronology," construction took some two centuries, from around 400–600 CE.

9. Spink 2007: 139.

10. Spink 2007: 179–203 provide a detailed account of Cave 16 and a hypothetical reconstruction of the process of its construction.

11. Natural forces of erosion are the principal culprit in the loss of these original paintings. However, Spink 2007: 191 also describes past practices of human entrepreneurial removal for souvenirs. One such extracted fragment now resides in Boston's Museum of Fine Arts collection.

12. "Ghaṭōtkacha Cave Inscription of Varāhadēva" in Mirashi 1955: 112–119. Ghatotkacha is eleven miles west of Ajanta.

13. "Ajanta Cave Inscription of Varāhadēva," verse 22, in Mirashi 1955: 103–111.

14. Schopen 1990: 205.

15. For a detailed analysis of Jain Deogarh, see Bruhn 1969. The main Jain complex dates from the early medieval period, but some remains indicate the existence of an earlier Jain shrine there.

16. Vats 1952 offers the fullest account of Deogarh temple. For a full architectural description, see Meister, Dhaky, and Deva 1988: 48–52. For an argument about the original iconographic design, see Lubotsky 1996.

17. Huntington 1985: 211.

18. Vats 1952.

19. *Matsya Purana*, chapters 252–270. See Davis 2018: 360–364. Agrawala 1963: 342 argues that these eighteen chapters were an independent treatise incorporated into the Purana. On the date, Hazra (1940) suggests that the *vastu* portion of the *Matsya Purana* was composed between 550–650 CE, by Vaishnavas in the Narmada River area.

20. Working with evidence from the Tamil region, Vidya Dehejia estimates that Hindu shrines in southern regions adopted processional images as a central part of festivals in the sixth or seventh centuries CE (Dehejia 2021: 14).

21. For a clear analysis of Elephanta's layout, with helpful diagrams, see Michell 1983. The second entryway is now the more common route for tourists.

22. See O'Flaherty 1983 for a succinct overview of the forms and myths represented in these sculptural panels. More detailed analysis is available in Collins 1988.

23. For a full discussion of the Pashupata origin story and the dissemination of the Pashupatas, see Cecil 2020.

24. Ingalls 1962: 295. Ingalls compares the Pashupata "seeking of dishonor" with that of the Greek Cynics.

25. Nicholson 2014: 22.

26. Both these excavated shrines were originally on islands that are now, after many decades of colonial-era landfill, part of Mumbai.

27. "Abhana Plates of Sankaragana," in Mirashi 1955: 38–44, line 4. Mirashi (1955: cxlviii) argues for Kalachuri patronage of Elephanta, as does Spink 1967: 9.

28. See Cecil 2020, chapter 4, for an effective questioning of the royal patronage assumption of previous scholars like Mirashi and Spink.

29. For an excellent overview of works on Chalukyas, see Michell 2014 (with outstanding photographs by Surendra Kumar). Kaligotla 2022 is an important recent study of Chalukya architectural practices. I am indebted to Shrinivas Padigar and Chandru Katageri for expert guidance at the Chalukya sites.

30. Eggeling 1874; Padigar 2010: 9–11.

31. On the Jains in the Kadamba dynasty, see Bisschop and Cecil 2021. On the Yapaniyas, see Nandi 1973: 55–61 and Singh 2008: 121–123, 136.

32. "Aihole Inscription of Pulikesin II," verses 1–2. Kielhorn 1981: 1–12; Padigar 2010: 37–40. On the identification of Jitendra as Rishabha, see Bisschop and Cecil 2021: 616.

33. Bolon 1992: 27.

34. Michell 2014: 103.

35. Padigar 2015: 67–68.

36. "Āmudālapāḍu plates of Vikramāditya I," in Padigar 2010: 67–70.

37. Sanderson 2004: 231. On the "Śaiva Age," see Sanderson 2009.

38. "Alaṃpūr Inscription of Vijayāditya," in Padigar 2010: 199–201.

39. "Badami Rock Inscription of King Narasimhavarman-I," in Lockwood 2001: 274.

40. Rabe 2001 provides the most complete and detailed overview of the Great Relief, its cultural context, and the history of its interpretation.

41. Srinivasan 1971: 83.

42. "The Pallava Inscriptions of the Seven Pagodas," Hultzsch 1984. Mahendraratha had also filled his Tiruchirapalli cave temple with his large array of *birudas*.

43. Lockwood 2001: 53–65.

44. This section draws on an earlier article, Davis 2006. For this treatment of Tamil Shaiva bhakti poetry, I am fundamentally indebted to Indira Peterson's translations and study, *Poems to Śiva* (1989).

45. Appar's hagiography is narrated at length in the twelfth-century Tamil *Periya Puranam* of Sekkilar. See Ramachandran 1990 for a full English translation. Peterson 1989: 283–301 provides a useful summary with selections of Appar's more biographical poems.

46. On Appar's polemics against the Jains, see Peterson 1998.

47. *Tevaram* 6.87.1, translation in Peterson 1989: 112.

48. Peterson 1989: 328 for Appar's account. Sekkilar's narrative from the *Periya Purana* is found in Ramachandran 1990: 173.

Epilogue: Varieties of Religious Cultures in Early India

1. Collingwood 1987: 112.
2. Collingwood 1978: 113.
3. Collingwood 1978: 115.
4. Collingwood 1978: 114.

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